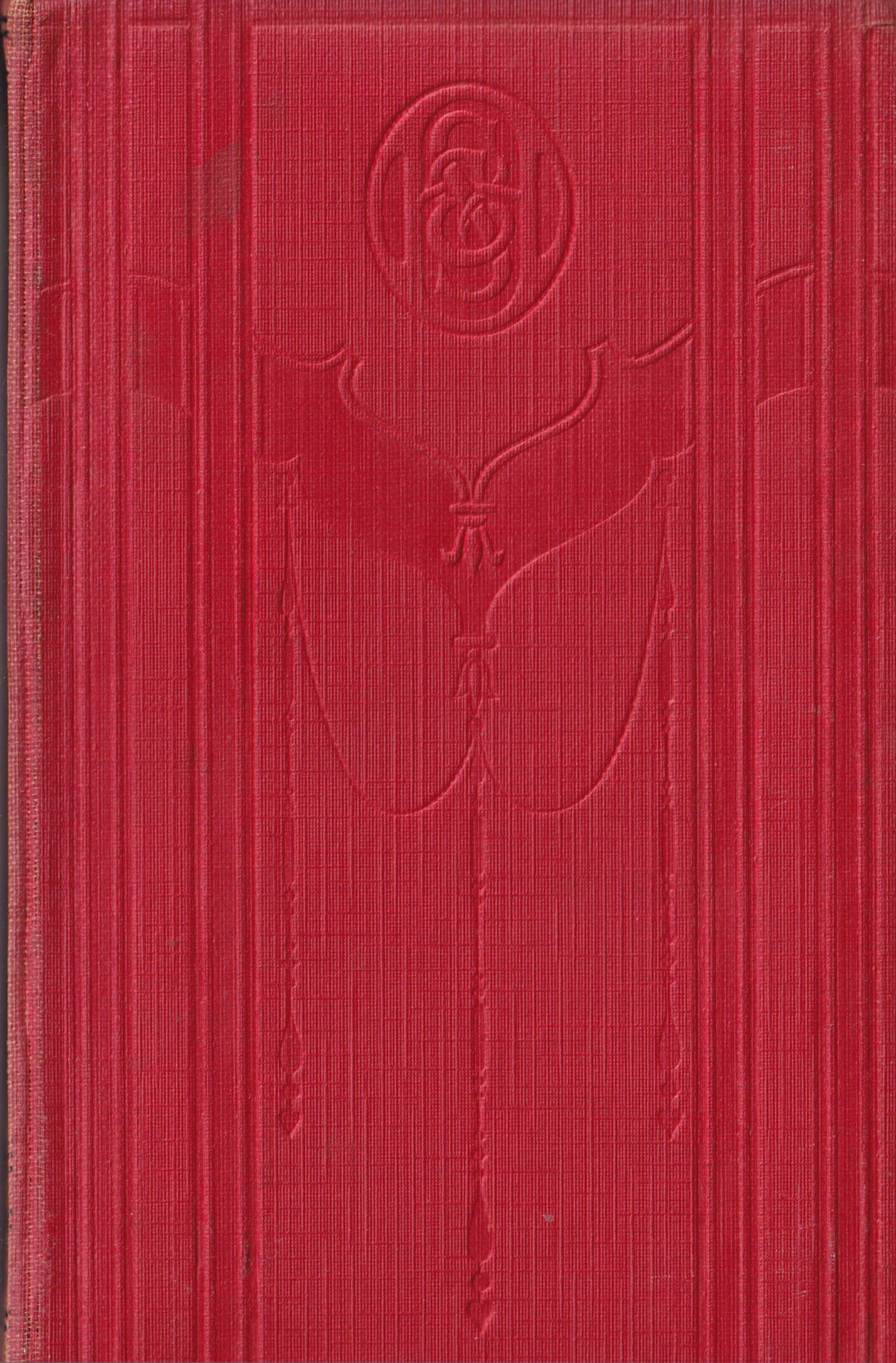

THE MAN WITH TALENT

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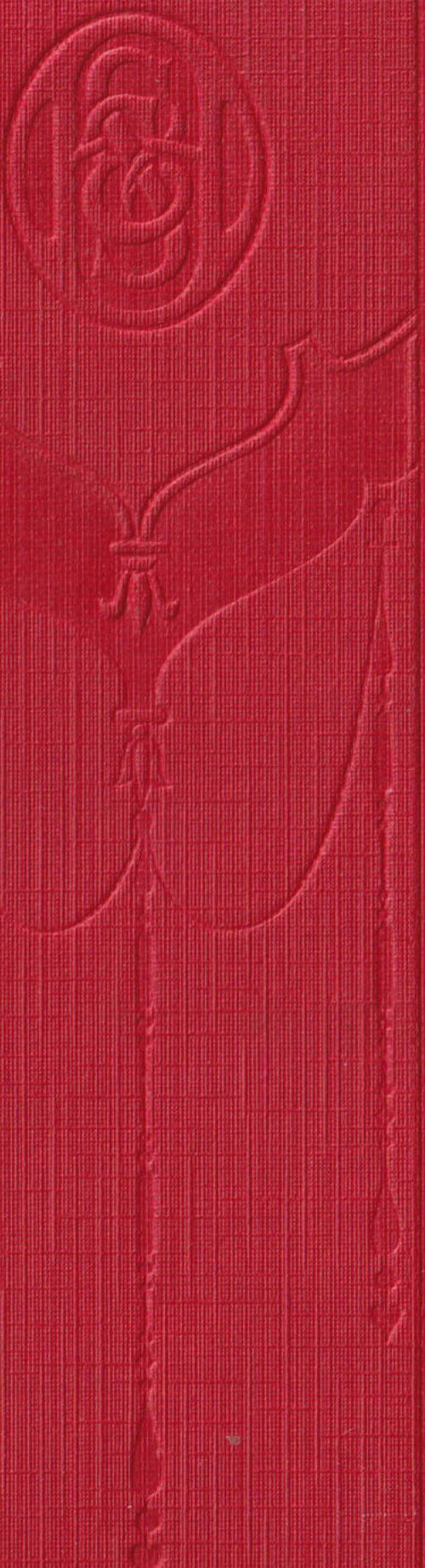

WILLIAM McNAIR
BAR HARBOR, MAINE

THE MAN WITH TALENT

NOVELS BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

Scissors Cut Paper
Stone Blunts Scissors
The Man who Laughed
The Exquisite Lady
The Muster of the Vultures
Suspect
The Man with Talent
Unfair Lady

HODDER AND
STOUGHTON
LTD., LONDON

THE MAN WITH TALENT

BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

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Dedication

For P. G. Wodehouse because of many happy hours with Plum before ever I knew him.

Part One

Part One

I

STANDING SCHOOL is situated on the side of a hill. The old grey pile has stood there now ever since seventeen hundred and something, changing outwardly not at all, changing inwardly with every new term which the school bell clangs into being three times a year. New faces, small faces, pink and wide-eyed with sometimes home-sickness, sometimes wonder and that hint of fear or exhilaration which comes in the face of a new experience, a new world to conquer, look eagerly up and down the corridors, into the classrooms, and scan the, to them, hardbitten and weather-beaten faces of the old stagers, the fifth and sixth men, the prefects in their spats, or, greatest awe here, those who have got their colours on the playing fields.

But, although Standing changes in personnel with every term, the proud boast of the old school is that Standing changes not at all. Three times a year there leave from Standing, each youth resplendent in the green and claret tie which it is a point of honour should be worn on this occasion, a handful of young men who, could they but know it, bear on their faces just that look of expectation, of

exultant interest in the future, which they bore only a few years previously when first they caught a glimpse of the old grey pile from the station cab wending its way up the curly road which leads from the village railway station. Each of these young men is finely fitted from a mould, the Standing mould, and there are enthusiasts, chiefly old women and bellicose colonels whose sons and grandsons have been to the school, who will tell you without a hint of laughter in their eyes or voices, that you can tell a man who has been to Standing anywhere. "So upright, my dear!" Laughter should be there, of course; the mould is not peculiar to Standing or to any other school. But it is there, very much there, all the same.

The unofficial motto of the school is Upright, and it should be set in golden letters over a silver shield which bears a picture of the chapel spire, so upright that it reaches on tip-toe to Heaven. Actually it is something in Latin which means "We have no fear," and it is scrawled in green all round a rampant claret horse.

Standing was built on the side of a hill. A climb of two hundred feet will bring you to the top, where you may gaze to your heart's content on a map of the countryside, drawn not in ink and man-made colour, but in actual fact and by nature's paint-brush on the plain beneath you. Just at the bottom of the hill, nestling in some trees, lies the little village which gave its name to the school. Winding

upwards you can see the road which brings the small fresh faces with the expectant eyes and a few years later leads them away again, changed very little except in feature, ready and equipped to do battle with the outside world. If you turn your head and look to the other side, you will see the playing fields, cut off from beech trees by a sunken road, and if you have lunched and it is a Monday, or a Wednesday, or a Saturday, you will see little dots in various colours making a full use of them. Games are compulsory at Standing: "So upright, my dear!"

But, should you tire of looking into distances, and drop your eyes so that you can see what is happening just under your nose, you will notice that there are seats, with view-restricting trees cut to the roots, along a willowy path. This is the Walk.

In his first year every little boy learns to hate this Walk, perhaps because on fine Sunday afternoons its perambulation is compulsory. But when the youth has attained the dignity of a study, the Walk is no longer unavoidable, and immediately becomes attractive as indeed it is. It takes an hour or so to traverse from end to end, an hour in which a boy can be alone in the fresh air to face a crisis, an hour in which a friendship can be made or lost, an hour in which anger can be cooled or a resolution finally adopted. The Walk is peculiar to Standing: the Walk is part of Standing: wise masters use it as a safety-valve instead of some

hundred lines in a stuffy class-room. God gave the Walk to Standing as a birthday gift and old boys frequently come back to use it.

There should be a platinum path on that silver shield, winding round the slender, lofty spire.

2

It was a very fine Sunday afternoon in mid-summer. Many couples—and a few single boys wrestling with the little problems which loom so big in early youth—were using the Walk. But the etiquette of Standing's Walk is never broken: once a boy in a party of boys sets foot on the path, no other will speak a word to him; a tacit agreement has existed for over a century that in Standing's Walk a man's thoughts are his own.

Alan Fergusson and Billy Blyth were together. They were talking quietly, very deep in their conversation, very concerned with what was in their minds. They scarcely noticed the other users of the Walk, although these stepped aside deferentially to let them pass. The Captain of the School is a very great personage in Standing, and his Senior Prefect second only to his Captain. King of the Walk was Alan Fergusson.

"I don't like it," said Alan, "Smacks of the all wrong to me."

"And to me," said his Senior Prefect gloomily.

"Question is," said Alan, "what are we to do?"

The other did not answer.

"Well?" insisted Alan.

"On the face of it, there's——"

Fergusson stopped his friend with a gesture of the hand.

"There's only one thing to do? That's what's in your mind, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Go to the Head and tell him what we know?"

"Yes."

"Not too good, Billy, old boy. Not too good from our point of view . . . or his."

The younger boy looked up, an expression of surprise on his face.

"Not too good?" he asked, "I . . . I don't understand."

"Well, listen."

But for a minute Fergusson did not continue. Thoughts were in his mind, a jumble of thoughts which would not disentangle themselves into coherent speech. For a few moments he struggled with himself: then at last he spoke:

"I find it difficult to express. You mustn't think it . . . melodramatic . . . sentimental. But I don't want to go to the Head in this case. It's . . . it's serious—no one knows that better than I do. A nasty business . . . but——"

"It's just because it is such a nasty business that you should take it to the Head."

"I wonder if you're right. Listen . . . when

you and I were made Prefects, it was because we were expected to run Standing. You know what the Head said in his study . . . 'We have no fear,' and all that sort of thing. 'I rely on you to keep the school upright'."

"Yes," broke in Billy Blyth eagerly, "Upright. That's just the point. D'you call what Hackness has been doing, upright?"

"Upright has two meanings," said Alan seriously, "and one of them means Standing."

He blushed unwillingly. He had been guilty of sentiment, and sentiment in the schoolboy's code of unwritten rules is a subject for laughter. Alan Fergusson would have hated to be laughed at just then, because he was struggling with right and wrong, struggling with his pronounced sense of justice.

He began to talk rapidly, the words tumbling over one another now, the desire to be finished, to have expressed his hitherto unspoken idea, paramount in his mind.

"If I go to the Head, what will happen? Hackness and Masters will probably be . . . expelled. I don't mind what happens to Masters . . . he's a spineless idiot anyway. But I'll be blighting the life of Hackness for good and all, and . . . I don't want to do that. Hackness has only a few weeks to go before he leaves the school for good. I don't say he's been much use to Standing, but . . . that fifty against Charterhouse saved the match. And he never gets credit for anything he does—never has. Men hate him, don't they, Billy?"

"Yes. Small wonder."

"Oh, I don't know. He's not so bad as that. He's . . ."

"Firstly, a sneak. Secondly, a bully. Thirdly, mean. And that's the fellow you want to save!"

Blyth spoke rather bitterly. His friend laughed.

"It does sound silly, doesn't it? But I do want to save him. And just because he's all those things you've mentioned."

Blyth glanced at his companion:

"You'd better have an egg with your tea. I'll run back and tell your fag, if you like. I'm told the yolk is very good to strengthen the brain."

Alan Fergusson smiled.

"Seriously, I mean what I say. If the Head gets to hear of this and . . . sacks him, Hackness has got a bitter outlook for the rest of his life. He can't go to Oxford—no college would have him. He's got a past . . . at eighteen . . . which will have to be kept hidden wherever he goes. And all this is to happen only a few weeks before he's safely through his last term."

"Yes, yes," Blyth spoke impatiently, "but has he the right to get away with it?"

"I doubt it," said Fergusson quietly, "but have I the right to blast his life?"

"I don't see how you're going to get out of it," grumbled Blyth.

"I think I'd better beat him," said Fergusson slowly, "and tell him why."

"Beat him!"

The words seemed to escape from Billy's lips, the underlying astonishment a very part of them.

"Beat him! You can't, Alan! Beat a cricket colour and a member of the Sixth!"

"Sounds a bit unusual, doesn't it?" said Alan slowly. "But what else am I to do?"

"Unusual! It's unheard of!"

"Is that any reason for not doing it?"

A steely tone had crept into the voice of the boy, a tone which his friend knew well. It meant that his mind was made up, that the subject having been satisfactorily settled was dismissed. Such was the way with this quiet, determined boy; such perhaps was the quality which had given him his position in the school.

Billy Blyth felt awkward. Straightforward as was his friend this was too unusual for words. The school would follow Fergusson wherever led up to one point—the wall of tradition. But tradition had it that a school colour, or a member of the Sixth, was never beaten.

Billy Blyth was ready to follow Alan anywhere, but not without first stating his opinion.

"Listen, Alan. I don't agree with you. Of course you're Captain of the school, and what you say is good enough for me if you've made up your mind. It'll be good enough for the rest of Standing too, if you've made up your mind . . . I'll see to that. But . . . Standing has said that school colours or members of the Sixth . . . yes, you know all that as

well as I do. What I don't understand is why you're so keen to save Hackness. He's a little rat, anyway. We've always thought so, even when we were in the Junior together. I've told you what he is, and now I'll prove it. A sneak I said, and a sneak he is. D'you remember when I pinched those apples? Nobody'd have known if he hadn't told the matron! I got six of the best for that. Mind, I don't grudge him those personally . . . I saw that he got them back with interest. Secondly, a bully. Not a big muscular bully, but a nasty furtive bully. You know the sort—springing out on little juniors. Thirdly, mean. D'you remember that birthday cake his mother sent him? He kept what he couldn't eat in his boots. And forgot about it, thank goodness. I didn't see it, but I'm told the sugar icing looked splendid on his socks."

Alan Fergusson did not laugh. For some time he walked on in silence, his friend occasionally casting an anxious glance at his worried face. Then, quite suddenly, Alan slipped his arm through his companion's.

"If the wicket is soft," he said, "we'd better play the Shrimp on Wednesday. It'll suit his slow stuff. And you mustn't keep snicking at those off balls, Billy. I want a big score from you . . . you haven't done too well in school matches this year, have you? By the way, tell Masters I'll see him at six—and Hackness at half-past, please."

3

"I have a point of five," said the Head.

"No good," said his Senior Housemaster.

"I have a tierce major," said the Head.

"No good either."

The Head sighed. But as he did so he produced his bombshell.

"I have fourteen aces."

"Ah! I was afraid of that."

"Fifteen," said the Head, playing his first card.

"Point of six, quarte to a King. That makes ten."

"What in?"

"Spades."

"Thank you."

"Ten," said the Housemaster, playing his card.

"Sixteen," said the Head. "I don't like this Hackness business."

"Ten. So you'd heard of it."

"Seventeen. Of course I'd heard of it."

"Ten. What will you do?"

"Eighteen. I hope I shall do nothing."

"Eh?"

"Play your card."

"Sorry. Eleven."

"Dash. I thought you'd have discarded that one."

"Ah! Twelve."

"Nineteen," said the Head gleefully, banging

down an ace. "I hope I shall do nothing. If it comes to me I have but one course open to me. It will ruin his career. But if Fergusson has imagination—then Hackness may be saved."

"Should he be saved?"

"Twenty."

"Twelve."

"Twenty-one."

"Twelve."

"Fergusson can answer that question best. He has a sense of values. The rest are yours, I think? Dear, dear, another game gone west. What do I owe you? One and six? I'll have to owe it to you. You must give me my revenge to-morrow."

4

There came a knock on the study door, a timid knock. The tone of Standing's chiming clock had just died away, having announced that six o'clock had arrived. Fergusson's voice from within the study told his visitor to enter.

A long pale-faced youth opened the door and obeyed the invitation. He shut the door behind him, and stood nervously just inside the room.

"You sent for me?"

Alan Fergusson looked at him.

"Yes, Masters. I understand that you asked leave to have supper with your parents in the village three nights ago."

"Yes, Fergusson."

"That the invitation was a forgery, that you went instead to the village pub and . . . well, that is enough."

The pale-faced youth did not answer, but his fingers twitched nervously as he wound his handkerchief into a ball.

"Do you deny it?"

"Er . . . no, Fergusson."

"You admit to having broken bounds?"

"Yes, Fergusson."

There was a short pause.

"Listen, Masters. I'm fed up with you. If it wasn't for someone else you'd go straight to the Head and he'd expel you, I don't doubt. But there are reasons why I'm going to treat your case as a simple breaking bounds, and shall forget the . . . forgery and the pub. I understand that you have been suffering in another way for your foolishness. Is that so?"

Wonder mixed with relief was in Master's voice as he answered.

"You seem to know everything!"

"I know all about this. A member of the Sixth found out about your escapade. He has . . . been blackmailing you, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"He said that he would keep it quiet if I gave him some money."

"How much money?"

"Ten bob."

"You paid?"

"Yes."

"You shall have it back, but you will give it to the Bermondsey Settlement Fund."

"Oh, yes, Fergusson."

"I'll collect it and give it for you. Look in the list to see that it's there. And bend over that chair."

5

One chime boomed from Standing's clock. Masters had been gone a quarter of an hour. There came another knock on the door of Fergusson's study.

"Come in."

Hackness came in. A very different type of boy to Masters, he was singularly lacking in that coltish over-grown appearance of most youths. He was broad and well built, but his head was rather too small for his body, and his features sharp and pointed. He looked fit and strong, in spite of a rather sallow complexion intensified by his shining black hair.

"Good evening, Fergusson. Blyth informed me that you wanted to see me."

"I do."

For a few seconds Alan Fergusson paused. Hackness was behaving with so much assurance that he found himself wondering whether this could really be a pose. But the very next words which Hackness spoke cleared the air.

"Masters sneaked?"

"No."

"Oh!"

For the first time Hackness seemed to be taken aback.

"But," said Fergusson quickly, "I know all about it. Masters only confirmed what I already knew. In the first place, Hackness, please give me ten shillings."

The other laughed, but without a word handed over four half-crowns.

"In the second place, Hackness, have you any reasons to suggest as to why we shouldn't now proceed to the Head?"

"None at all."

"Why did you do it?"

There was again a short pause; then, abruptly, the pose of Hackness fell from him like a cloak.

"Why did I do it? Out of devilment, I suppose! Because I saw a chance of making something out of you all! D'you think I like this place, Fergusson? With every hand against me? It's not likely, is it? You all hate me, I know; well, I hate you all! I saw that fool Masters writing a letter, and I noticed that it was being written on strange notepaper. I got hold of the blotting paper afterwards, and a mirror told me all I wanted to know. I didn't do it to make money—I seized my chance to make it as uncomfortable for one of you as all of you have made it for me all my life at Standing!"

Fergusson said nothing after this storm: he stared out of the window.

"Come on," said Hackness, "Let's go to the Head and get it over."

"No."

"What?"

There was vast surprise in the voice of the keyed-up youth.

"I'm not taking you to the Head," said Fergusson evenly.

Hackness hesitated: then:

"Oh. What are you going to do?"

"Listen. It's just because I believe you—because I guessed beforehand at your motives—that I'm not taking you to the Head. I think you're wrong—quite wrong—in your point of view. But I'm afraid you have some reason to be bitter with Standing. You shouldn't have been sent to a public school."

"Thanks very much."

"Don't misunderstand me. It's just because I don't want any misunderstanding that I'm speaking very plainly. If I take you to the Head you'll be expelled: that would finish you. On the other hand I can't let you off altogether; that wouldn't be . . ."

"Go on. Say it!" Hackness laughed bitterly. "Upright! Standing for righteousness! Standing for fair play! A fat lot of fair play I've had, a fat lot of . . ."

"Shut up," Fergusson's voice was very firm. "So I propose to beat you."

For a long moment neither said a word.

Both boys looked at each other steadfastly, and neither flinched the issue.

"You can't do that," said Hackness at last. "You seem to forget I'm in the Sixth. Not to mention the Eleven."

"I have forgotten nothing. I'm surprised that you should mention that: Standing and its traditions seem to mean so little to you."

Hackness laughed.

"All right, you win," he said, "carry on."

6

"And I don't expect to hear another word about this, Hacker. Or that you are in any way other than a model member of your house . . . and the Sixth . . . in future. And, by the way, I think we'll play the Shrimp on Wednesday, if the wicket's soft, don't you? Blair hasn't been very successful: perhaps if we drop him for a match it'll buck him up. See that you make another fifty."

"Thanks, Fergusson."

Again at the door:

"And . . . er . . . thanks awfully, Alan."

7

But the affair was not ended thus, as Alan Fergusson had hoped it might be. A school

is the last place in the world to keep a secret, and somebody suspected something which he imparted, under an oath of secrecy, to his best friend. Hackness had been seen going into Fergusson's study at half-past six, perhaps. Rumours began to float about on a gentle breeze, until the wind freshened in gusts, and finally there was an ugly story about the breaking of Standing's tradition.

In self-defence the Sixth held a meeting, of which Fergusson was denied knowledge. Hackness was waited on by a deputation in his study, but stolidly refused any information. It was known that Masters was in some way involved; he was summoned before the Sixth, and interrogated.

Masters, small-minded, was flattered by the unexpected and unaccustomed notoriety. He told the Sixth all that he knew, and a good deal that he only guessed.

The next step was inevitable: armed with the knowledge that Fergusson had at least behaved strangely and in a manner so autocratic as to be unwelcome to so conservative an institution as Standing, even if he had not actually violated its tradition, the deputation proceeded to call upon Billy Blyth as Senior Prefect. There in his study the members made it plain that the Sixth was of opinion that Fergusson was unfit to lead the School. They expressed polite regret: personally he was popular with all of them. They assumed expressions of injured amazement that such

conduct could come from one hitherto so blameless; but they asked for their privilege, a meeting of the Prefects to discuss the whole matter fully.

Billy Blyth spoke quietly but firmly when they had finished.

"Now look here, you fellows," he said, "I know all about this business. It's ugly from start to finish, but old Alan did . . . what he did do for the best. I'm not at liberty to tell you the whole facts . . . Alan told me on the Walk. But he did the best for Standing. Of course, I'm not denying you your privilege: if you still say that a Prefects' Meeting must be convened, convened it shall be. But I think the rumours will die down if nothing is done, die a natural death. And that'll be a splendid thing for Standing."

The delegation, always polite, demurred. The rumours were too strong to admit of such a passive treatment: the dignity of the Sixth was at stake. Would Billy kindly convene the Meeting?

Billy Blyth had no choice: the dignity of the Sixth was at stake, and a sacrifice was demanded on the wheel of tradition.

8

"Now, Alan, we've taken this step because we were forced into it. The Sixth have laid

their plaint, and it is that one of their members has been treated like a junior. I needn't go into details, and they don't actually accuse you of beating Hacker, but they know a lot. Masters told them: Hacker won't say a word."

Alan Fergusson smiled.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I think," said Billy awkwardly, "you'd better tell us all about it."

Alan shook his head.

"I'm sorry, fellows, but . . . it can't be done. All I can say is that I'd do the same again in the same circumstances. Not very satisfying an answer, I'm afraid. D'you want me to take my resignation to the Head?"

"Er . . . not yet." Billy Blyth, spokesman for the Prefects, shifted awkwardly. Not one of the uncomfortable red-faced boys around him could bring himself to look for long at Alan Fergusson to catch his eye. "Won't you . . . tell us anything?"

"Nothing."

"There are rumours fairly flying about," said Billy quickly, "rumours that say a member of the Sixth . . . and a School colour . . . was beaten. That's what got the Sixth going. Those rumours have got to be laid, one way or the other. It's for the good of Standing. Now will you tell us?"

Alan Fergusson smiled to his friend.

"Not a hope," he said, "and neither will you tell them, Billy. On the Walk, remember." He paused for a moment. "I can't, anyway.

It's not fair to Hacker, and he . . . needs a bit of fair play."

Billy sighed.

"Very well. But there are three questions to which I must have some sort of answer."

"Carry on."

"Do you deny having broken Standing's tradition?"

"No."

"Do you regret having broken Standing's tradition?"

A faint smile played about Alan's lips as he made answer; the bitter words of a boy driven passionately against his fellows, the halting words of thanks, came to his mind.

"No."

"There is no need then for the third question. Will you go to your study? I will call on you shortly."

The door closed behind the upright figure of the Captain of the School. Prefects' Meetings were few and far between in the history of Standing, but that was the inevitable procedure. The arraigned person waited in his study for the visit of the Senior Prefect, to communicate the sentence.

Billy Blyth leant back hopelessly in his chair.

"Pride!" he suddenly burst out, "Dignity! Tradition! Damn the lot! Let's have a bit of common sense. I'll tell you what he did to Hacker, in spite of all that about the Walk. He beat him—beat him good and proper—because he didn't want to get him expelled. He could

do nothing else. He said Hacker had been driven to his action—because of all of us, because of his treatment by Standing. He said Standing owed him this one chance."

The flood of oratory ceased as abruptly as it had started. Billy Blyth sat there, very red in the face, staring round defiantly at his uneasy colleagues. He knew that he had been guilty of almost as great an enormity as Alan Fergusson: information obtained on the Walk was information for personal knowledge only. But the call of friendship had broken down the centuries old wall of tradition, scattering the bricks and mortar, and the faithful Billy was left breathless, rather startled, almost blinded by his courageous impulse, standing blinking on the other side.

The slow-thinking, even-tempered Blair broke the silence.

"Seems to me," he said, "Alan may have been right. Probably was. But . . . you can't do that sort of thing. Not if you're Captain of the School."

Billy sank back in his chair. He knew he was defeated; he knew, without looking at those others round the table, what their verdict would be.

"Seems to me," said Blair again, "we'd better get it over. You'd better ask for his resignation, Billy. Then I'll take it with you to the Head."

"What do we say to the Head?" asked a voice.

"That's easy," answered Blair. "A Prefects'

Meeting, convened by request of the Sixth, has asked for the Captain's resignation after examining certain facts. The Head won't ask for details; he probably knows all about it anyway."

"What if Alan refuses to resign?" asked someone else.

"He won't refuse," said Billy shortly.

"Seems to me," said Blair's voice rather sleepily, "we'd better get it over."

Billy Blyth rose from his seat and left the room.

9

The Head received Blyth and Blair that evening, and heard what they had to say.

"I can't deny," he said quietly, when they had finished, "that I was expecting you. A Headmaster, Blyth, knows a great deal more, if he is any good, than he is prepared to notice officially. I understand that this resignation is the direct outcome of a . . . breach of conduct as laid down by Standing's unwritten law?"

"Yes, sir."

"Quite. Well, I have nothing to say, barring the fact, of course, that I accept the decision of your Prefects' Meeting. To-morrow, Blyth, you will take over the duties of Captain of the School. And you, Blair, will become the Senior Prefect. And if I may give a piece

of advice to both of you . . . see that you are worthy successors to your immediate predecessors. That will be all: good night."

10

"*. . . so that I have written this letter to you to explain precisely how it comes about that Standing has lost the services of a lad, your son, courageous and high-minded as no other Captain of Standing has been within my rather lengthy experience as Headmaster of the School. A sacrifice was demanded on the altar of tradition; I am not prepared to state whether I think this sacrifice pagan or Christian, but all concerned will benefit, morally, in the end; and I shall make it my very own business to see that your boy does not suffer in the future in any possible way. I am journeying to Oxford to-morrow to see the Principal of the College which is to have the honour of harbouring him next year: he shall have the true facts. As an old Standing boy yourself you will, I hope, appreciate my feelings when I tell you Alan is true to type, and to his sense of duty. . .*"

Part Two

Part Two

I

THERE is a small restaurant known as the Bodega which numbers among its patrons a large proportion of doctors, surgeons and medical students. It is in a little known side street off one of the busiest thoroughfares of London West, within very easy reach from Harley Street and, perhaps even more important, St. Timothy's Hospital itself. It is the sort of retiring little place which relies upon mouth to mouth recommendation for its custom, and which supplies surprisingly good fare at very reasonable prices behind its dowdy window. It seeks to satisfy, and bases its success on this laudable endeavour.

It is owned and run by a man with an Italian name, a Greek complexion, an American vocabulary, and a French moustache. Normally he speaks English with a strong East End accent, but occasionally he remembers that his establishment is situated in the West End, and then he becomes almost unintelligible: in fact, if it were not for his expressive hands, he would puzzle more than a few of his casual customers. Everyone, at first glance, he will call "Doctor." No doubt he has found that

the necessary corrections are fewer starting in this manner, and it pleases the students.

Into this establishment, just at the very height of the busy lunch hour, strode a tall man with an attractive, if experienced, expression on his rather pallid face. He looked as if he was ready to laugh at any moment and to weep the next, but seldom to be bored or quite uninterested. Yet noticeable enough as was this quaintly carried advertisement of a sympathetic nature, his features denoted strength of character, and so did his hands. Especially his hands: long tapering fingers, very neat, very quiet, very sure, very efficient. The hands of a great surgeon.

Alan Fergusson was a surgeon. Resident Surgeon to St. Timothy's Hospital, no less, and very rapidly making a great name. The little owner of the Bodega saw him as he entered, and straightway made for him.

"Ah! *Mr.* Fergusson. Your table, sir. This way."

The accent was definitely on the Mister: Antonio liked to show that he knew the correct manner of address when it came to his beloved medical patrons. He was more than likely to confuse a peer of the realm with a medical man, but never to call a doctor "Mister" or a surgeon "Doctor."

"Good morning, Antonio. Anyone here I know?"

Antonio smiled.

"Only about a hundred of your students,

Mister," he said, "and Mr. Webb. Mr. Webb asked for you. I put him at your table."

"Good," said Alan shortly.

He was led to the small table which he nearly always occupied for lunch, and as he approached it he saw the broad back of his friend, who was evidently already half-way through his meal.

"Morning, Jarvis."

Jarvis Webb looked up, and at once Alan was struck by his appearance. Webb was well known as a fashionable surgeon practising from Wimpole Street; his rise had been meteoric, more rapid even than that of Alan himself, and as befitted a naturally meticulous and entirely successful man, his clothes left nothing to be desired. But to-day there was a subtle difference; without anything actually being out of place, there was a suggestion of hurry, an indication of fretting, an insinuation in his whole appearance and in his attitude that the man was harassed and perplexed.

"Morning, Alan."

The usual greeting: but at once Alan's interest, casual and but vaguely disquieted from his friend's aspect, redoubled inwardly. He sat down at the vacant seat of the table which had been laid for two, and nothing in his attitude gave away the fact that he was shrewdly concerned. Yet his instinct for healing was crying out aloud within him, was clamouring that here was a sick man, sick mentally, a patient to be healed.

Alan ordered his light lunch.

They talked: and all the time they talked of normal subjects—shop, the prospects for the Test matches, more shop—Alan retained the uncomfortable feeling that there was something working in the mind of the man opposite, some question calling out aloud to be released from the whirligig which at that moment was the bewildered brain of Jarvis Webb.

More shop. But a peculiarly disjointed sort of shop; no one particular branch of shop could hold for very long.

At last, it came, as it was bound to come.

"Alan . . . a friend of mine's in trouble."

The old beginning, but no hint of recognition in the eyes or manner of the man facing the speaker.

"Oh? Let's hear about it. That's to say if you're at liberty?"

"Well, it was meant for me only, of course. But . . . I can't give sound advice unless . . . unless I get the opinion of an unbiassed outsider." Neat, that, thought Alan Fergusson. "You won't let it go any further, of course?"

"Of course not."

"Well . . . it's about a friend . . . who was engaged to be married. He's like us . . . a surgeon . . . you know him, incidentally. I'm afraid it's an old story, but . . . rather wrecks one's belief in woman if it happens . . . near one."

Alan lit a cigarette.

"Chucked him?"

"Yes . . . well, not exactly. He . . . he

doesn't quite know what to do. He asked me. I . . . I said I'd think about it."

There was a pause. Alan Fergusson leant forward.

"Let's hear about it."

The words came with a rush.

"The friend was sent for, professionally, to the house of this girl. Not her house, exactly: she lives with her brother and his wife. He was called in to see the wife, his girl's sister-in-law. Bad case. Operation necessary at once. Waiter, bring me some brandy."

Alan waited patiently.

"Thanks. Leave the bottle."

As soon as the waiter was out of earshot.

"He went downstairs to inform the husband that he would operate that afternoon. He knew the house well, of course. Bob . . . the husband . . . has a study which can be reached by going through the sitting-room off the hall, or by walking a few yards along a grass path from the front door. The opposite wing to the bedroom quarters, you understand. The . . . the surgeon took the path . . . bright sunshine . . . spot of fresh air to think out the kindest phraseology for the husband, you see. Serious and all that kind of thing, but with any luck going to be all right, and undue worry quite unnecessary. As he walked along the surgeon glanced through the windows of the sitting-room, and saw his man there. He was just about to break in upon him, when he saw out of the corner of his eye the suggestion

of something white and filmy . . . lady's dress, you know . . . from the window of the study. He was struck at once with the idea that it was Betty . . . his girl . . . that he would tell her first and get her to help him with her brother. He walked the few steps necessary to take him to the study window."

Jarvis Webb halted and drank down his liqueur. Almost in the same motion he had again filled the glass. Alan Fergusson remained quite still, saying no word, his mind fully engaged with the paramount problem, not that being related to him by the overwrought man on the other side of the table, but that of what to do, what to say, to alleviate the mental agony of a friend.

"He looked in at the window. He saw his girl . . . in the arms of a stranger . . . a damned dago . . ."

"Quiet." Alan's voice was firm.

"He was kissing her . . . not . . . not ordinarily . . . but kissing her on her lips, and . . . she wasn't resisting."

Jarvis Webb laughed. Quite quietly, but in no sense an expression of mirth. Into that laugh there crept a wealth of bitter hatred, of ideals shattered, of faith scattered to the four winds. It was an ugly sound, a noise reminiscent of a beast. Alan quite involuntarily shuddered.

Alan looked around him. Most of the tables, so recently occupied by chattering and light-hearted manhood, were now vacated. Except

for a very old gentleman in a slumbering mood brought on by a well-fed stomach, they were alone in the room. Alan looked at his watch, and started. He was due back at the hospital in ten minutes, an appointment for which he could not possibly be late.

"I'm afraid——"

"Yes, I know you're in a hurry; I shan't be long. For a few seconds he couldn't believe his eyes. His first impulse was to smash the glass, to break into the room, to rescue Betty from that . . . that stranger's unwelcome importunities. And to make such pulp of him that he'd never be recognizable again. But then he realized that no rescue was necessary . . . that the stranger's importunities were not unwelcome . . . that no pulp was indicated. They parted: only for a moment. Betty put her arms round his neck . . . and kissed him of her own free will."

For a moment he paused, but only for a moment.

"God! I'd have slaughtered that man; I'd have——"

"So would I," said Alan firmly, "if I had been your friend. But he didn't: well, I can only say one thing; either he accepts her explanation, should she be willing to give one, and forgets every single detail as if nothing whatever had occurred, or he breaks with her for good. The dago isn't worth touching. Jarvis, I really must go."

"Are you going to dine here to-night?"

"I wasn't going to . . but I'm willing if you are?"

"Do!"

"All right."

Alan got up. Antonio arrived at once with his hat.

"So long, Jarvis."

"So long, Alan. Sorry. To have been such a nuisance, I mean."

"Don't be a fool. And, by the way, that's good advice for your friend too."

"What is?"

"Don't be a fool."

Alan was looking at the seductive bottle on the table as he pronounced his warning.

2

The waiting-room, furnished well if not actually luxuriously, seemed to the man and woman drab and lifeless. But the flow of their conversation never halted:

"And when she gets well enough, I'll take her to the sun—to Madeira perhaps, or further still. Won't that be fun?"

"Great fun, Bob."

"Think of it! My Winnie permanently cured at last! Of course I know it'll take time: Jarvis said some months before she would be fit to travel if all went well. If all went well! God, Betty, I hope it'll be successful!"

He's taken one of my hands in his, and vaguely somehow I've noticed, rather in surprise, that his are moist. Anxiety, no doubt; nerve strain.

"It'll be all right, Bob. He . . . Jarvis . . . said we weren't to worry."

"Not unduly. He said he'd done it hundreds of times, and very seldom failed. Pray God he may not fail this time!"

"He won't. I'm sure he won't."

"Oh, no. I mustn't talk like this. Of course he won't. He's such a fine fellow, Betty, is your Jarvis."

I can't stand it; leave go my hand.

"And such a fine surgeon. They all say that of him. The matron told me that this morning: nobody to touch him, she said. How lucky we are to have him, Betty. Normally —if he were just called in to operate on a stranger, I could never have paid his charges. I've got you to thank for that, Betty: he's your Jarvis, and because of you he's put everything off for this!"

God! Why does he talk like this!

"He won't fail; of course, he won't. And then—later on—I'll take her to Madeira. D'you think she'd like Madeira, Betty? Lovely scenery, lovely sun, lovely flowers! Nothing to do all day but laze and eat; and then glorious cool nights for health-giving sleep. D'you think she'd like it, Betty?"

I shall scream in a minute. Why didn't Jarvis wait? I could at least have tried to explain.

Why didn't he come to us for a minute as he promised before going up to operate? Does he hate me now as much as that? Did I want him to wait? Do I want to explain? Did I . . .?

"D'you think she'd like it, Betty?"

"I think she would, Bob."

"So do I. But we'll have to ask her: she must go just exactly where she likes. I'll ruin myself if necessary to get her back to health. Betty! You must come too! That's an idea: to help me to look after her. She'd love that; you will, won't you, Betty? Or . . . of course, I forgot. You'll probably be married by then, to Jarvis—the man whose skill has given her back to me."

I don't think I shall scream, but I do think I shall faint. Surely it must be over by now? Why don't they come and tell us: then he'll stop talking. It's only nerves that make him talk: I don't think he can stop. Do I want to explain? Oh, God, I wish I knew!

"But if you can—if he'll let you go—you will come with us, won't you, Betty?"

"Yes, yes. I'll come, Bob."

"I knew you would. Just like your dear, faithful heart."

Faithful!

I've been a beast, of course. But . . . it was a moment of madness, I know, but I can't help it. I——

"She may not like Madeira, of course. She may want to go further away—the Canary

Islands or even Africa. Well, she can go where she pleases——"

The door is opening. Is it Jarvis?

The matron has come in. I don't like the look on her face. I don't like the look on her face. Bob . . . *Bob . . . I don't like the look on her face.*

3

It was close on half-past eight by the time that Alan Fergusson reached the Bodega for the second time that day. He was received by Antonio with the usual pleasure, but not at once led to his usual table. Antonio hummed and hawed: there was something on his mind.

Alan laughed.

"Well, cough it up, Antonio! Some baroneted doctor usurped my favourite table?"

"Oh, no, Mister Fergusson! That would never happen when I knew that you were coming. But your friend——"

"Webb?"

"Yes, Mister Webb. He is——"

"Intoxicated, Antonio?"

"Drunk, Mister Fergusson, very drunk. So I have not put him at your table, but at the little table over there behind the corner. You will be more private there."

Alan Fergusson frowned. Ever since lunch he had been preoccupied by the tale which Webb had unfolded to him during the meal;

he had no doubt that the "friend" referred to was none other than Webb himself, and he had not liked the state of mental agitation in which the catastrophe had left his brother surgeon. A busy man can sometimes get outside his preoccupation, and in a sense Alan had succeeded, but he knew that Jarvis Webb was just as busy, and he doubted his own ability, were he in his friend's position, to devote all that attention to his work which its very nature demanded. Antonio's announcement seemed to imply that Jarvis Webb had thrown aside his work, with inevitably harmful results to himself and to his practice, or, worse still, had——

Alan's frown deepened. No good to jump to conclusions, no good to allow a vivid imagination too much play. But he had an uncomfortable sensation of evil about him, a nauseating premonition which seemed to warn him to turn and leave the place at once. He shook himself mentally, angry that he, so normally matter-of-fact, should indulge in such fancies. It was stupid and unreasonable; the worst that could befall was an uncomfortable evening, and the possibility of having to see Jarvis Webb home to his house in Wimpole Street and perhaps put him to bed.

"All right, Antonio," he said quietly. "Mr. Webb has . . . is not quite himself to-day. Where is he?"

"This way, Mister."

Antonio's expressive shoulders easily conveyed to Alan the relief he felt that someone had

come who was willing to take charge of his drunken patron. Antonio had frequently put a young student into a cab and sent him home, but Antonio always did it with many shrugs and audible curses. The prospect of having to do the same for a full grown "mister" evidently had not pleased him.

They turned the corner. The table was well concealed from the remainder of the room. Antonio knew his job: a little business to be talked over at lunch, a little courtship over a glass of wine at dinner, in extreme cases an old customer just a little the worse for wear . . . this table was superb.

"Hullo, ol' man. Glad to see you. Sit down."

The voice was not so thick as he had expected, and Alan took the seat opposite his friend. But one glance at the flushed face and the protruding eyes cancelled this favourable first impression, and confirmed his worst fears. He had suggested the word "intoxicated" to Antonio, but the latter's subtle correction had been fully deserved. Jarvis Webb was very drunk.

"You're late."

"Yes, I know I am. Couldn't help it. A lot of work to do."

"Ah, of course. Perfect excuse: we medical men's lives are not our own. No, by no means. We must work to alli . . . alli . . . sorry, ol' man, alleviate suffering. Ha! ha! Death alle . . . alleviates suffering most effectually!"

The startling statement made Alan look at his friend sharply. Surely the strain had not been too much, and some little thing, some terribly important little thing had not snapped in his brain? Surely the shock, the bitter disappointment had not made him contemplate a manufactured ending to his life?

Alan looked at the bottle beside Webb's glass. It was half-full of brandy, half-full of Antonio's very best Napoleon brandy. There was no sign of food on the table, no used plate, no crumbs nor soiled knife.

"Have you dined?"

"Don't want food."

"When did you last feed?"

"Oh . . . with you at lunch."

"You must feed. Here, I'll order something . . ."

"Don't want food, I tell you. Don't argue with me. Can't stand any more argument."

Alan beckoned to the waiter, and consulted a menu.

"What about an omelette? And then a chop or something of that sort?"

"Good-night."

Alan looked up quickly, but Webb's eyes were already closed. He had lain his head on his folded hands on the table.

"Hell!" said Alan to himself, "this is great fun! One's dining companion fast asleep and awfully bottled. But perhaps it's a good thing. He may get rid of those morose ideas of his . . . they're dangerous."

He looked at the menu again.

"What about food? No, I think not; he'd probably be sick. I'll have an omelette, waiter..".

"Plain, sir? Or . . ."

"No, plain. And a chop to follow it: beer to wash it down. And take that bottle away. Was it full when it was brought to him? I thought so. All right."

Alan went through his meal quickly, undelayed by conversation. Webb slept on. But, even if he did not talk, Alan's thoughts were busy: he was wondering what to do for the sleeping man opposite. That he was hard hit—harder hit than Alan would have thought possible—there was no gainsaying. That he might do something rash in the fever of the first few days was an imminent possibility, but . . . there was so little that Alan could do to help. Salvation would come only in a veritable orgy of work, in utilizing every second of his waking minutes, in going to bed so tired that sleep would be a physical necessity. To-night would be all right in any case: the fumes of the brandy would see to the healing sleep, were already at work. But what of the morrow? Alan determined to ring up early and suggest a lunch together, a dinner with a music-hall to follow perhaps, something to while away the time not actually employed in work.

Alan finished his dinner. The bottle of the invaluable Napoleon was brought back. A very small quantity was poured into a very large glass.

Idly Alan slipped the stem between his fingers and made the golden liquid rotate slowly, receiving the warmth of his palm through the glass. Idly he raised it to his nose and sniffed appreciatively. Idly he looked up.

Jarvis Webb was looking at him, watching him closely. Gone was the flushed colouring, giving place to an almost startling whiteness, but the eyes had not changed one whit, excepting that a fire seemed to have been lighted in each pupil.

"Good stuff?"

Alan smiled:

"It is."

"It's not. It's damnable!"

Alan, unsmiling now, decided to humour him.

"I agree, if you take too much."

"If you take any at all! I didn't have too much at lunch."

Quickly Alan threw back his thoughts to that lunch they had taken together, to the last glimpse he could remember of Jarvis Webb sitting at the table, a wild yet hopeless look in his eyes, an open bottle of brandy on the table beside his right hand. What was it that he had said? "Don't be a fool." That was it. Alan wondered if his advice had been taken.

He decided to change the subject:

"What did you do this afternoon?"

"Killed a woman."

The unexpected answer came back pat, with such startling suddenness that Alan almost reeled with something of physical shock as the

sense of the words forced itself on his brain. A terrible dread came to him, a dread that he was too late, that anything he might now do would be useless since the harm had already been done. His active imagination pictured him in a court of law, with a Crown counsel interrogating: "You lunched with the prisoner on the day that it is alleged he committed his crime?" "You noticed nothing unusual in his manner or appearance?" "Please be careful of your answers: a natural desire to shield a friend may have disastrous consequences and discredit you as a witness: you have taken an oath to tell the truth and nothing but the truth."

There was only one thing to do: get at the truth and see what could be done. Alan shuddered: here was a state of affairs which he had read about, which he had seen preceded by great headlines in the more sensational evening and weekly newspapers, but which he had never dreamt he would be faced with himself. He looked across the table at Jarvis Webb, or rather the wild brandy-inflamed creature who had been Jarvis Webb so recently: he looked up apprehensively to see if some plain-clothes policeman was lurking in the neighbourhood of the table, retentive memory on the alert to take down mental notes of this most incriminating conversation, ready to pounce upon his unsuspecting victim.

There was nobody about.

Pounce—just as Jarvis Webb had pounced on

the girl called Betty, just as he had come upon her, itching fingers longing for the whiteness which was her throat, fingers given maniacal strength by blasted love and passion.

"Oh, God!" said Alan to himself in agony: "Oh, God!"

"How does it feel to be sitting opposite a murderer?"

Something seemed to have happened to Jarvis Webb: his speech was clearer now, much clearer: his voice, whilst low, was penetrating: his words seemed to be driven into Alan's dismayed brain.

"Shut up!" said Alan suddenly. "D'you want everyone to hear? What the devil are you talking about, Jarvis?"

For a moment the other remained silent; then he leant across the table so that his face was very close to Alan's.

"You remember what I told you . . . this morning at lunch?"

"Yes."

"About my friend?"

"Yes."

"I was that friend."

A caricature of a smile pulled at his lips, distorted his features.

"I haven't seen Betty again, but she's . . . she's . . . responsible for what happened! God, she is! I'd have done it all right if . . . if . . . she hadn't . . ."

"Stop," said Alan firmly. "That's better. What did you do?"

"You remember what I told you about Bob's wife—about her sister-in-law?"

A cold sweat began to break out on Alan Fergusson's forehead as the truth began to dawn.

"That an immediate operation was necessary to save her life."

"Yes."

"You . . . you bungled it?"

"Bungled it? I killed her: I've done that operation hundreds of times. I've never failed—until to-day. Bungled it? God! I killed her!"

"Why?"

Alan longed not to put the question, but it came to his lips almost in spite of himself.

"They said that . . . I . . . was drunk."

"They said?" Alan's voice was sharp. "Who said?"

"The anæsthetist. The matron of the home. The nurses."

"Good God!"

Ruined! That was what this revelation meant, as Alan knew only too well. But the next instant a great wave of relief surged over him as he realized that at least it was not a case for the hangman's rope. His thoughts were rudely shattered.

"She did it!" Jarvis Webb's voice rose almost to a scream. "She did it! If it hadn't been for her and that cursed dago . . ."

"For heaven's sake, be quiet."

Alan's tones were full of authority, and Webb relapsed into quiet again.

"Listen. What you say may be true, no doubt is. But . . . only up to a point. We all lose patients under the knife: the best of us do. And sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that it is due to our own shortcomings. Now don't be a fool. What you want is rest. You'd better go straight home to bed and to sleep . . ."

"Sleep? There'll never be sleep for me again!"

"Don't talk like a child. Of course there'll be sleep: this very night. We'll lunch together tomorrow and discuss the thing more fully. At the moment there's no use in doing so: we're both too agitated. Don't get up in the morning—don't be called. If you're late for lunch I shan't care. Look . . . I'll come back with you now."

He glanced at his friend and saw that Jarvis Webb was losing his moment of lucidity: once again the fumes of the brandy were gaining the mastery, and Webb's eyes were half-closed. Alan called for the waiter and paid the bill. He looked at his watch and was surprised at the lateness of the hour. He would have to be quick if he was to get back to St. Timothy's in time to make his accustomed final examination of reports on his patients before the close of the working day. He would take Jarvis Webb back to his home in a taxi, see him safely to bed, and meet him on the morrow.

Happy is mankind in that it knows so little in advance of the miscarriage of its man-made plans.

4

Alan Fergusson stepped into the fresh air. Somehow, away at last from contact with the brandy-bemused brain of Jarvis Webb, the fine air under the dark star-painted skies seemed good in some special manner. He heaved a great sigh of relief.

Webb had been tractable: Webb was in bed, drowsy, out of harm's way for the moment. But the reckoning would have to be faced.

A dark, silent figure, shadowy in the light of the moon, stepped quickly into the sheltering doorway of a great house.

Alan, deep in his thoughts, a frown disfiguring his good-natured face, passed on.

The man taking advantage of the darkness watched him turn the corner. Feverish eyes watched fearfully lest Alan might have seen him; gave him a moment lest he might retrace his steps: decided that he would not. A warped brain with but one resolve stepped silently once more into the street.

5

Rooms in a great hospital are proverbially

misleading. Those which are wards, bright with plenty of light and air from many windows, spotlessly clean, ornamented by flowers of diverse brilliant colours, would give no hint of pain and suffering were it not for the dark screen which sometimes makes its dread appearance. Other rooms, however, the rooms allocated to the staff of the hospital and which might reasonably be supposed to be even gayer—since here, at least, men of good health forgather to crack a merry jest and steal a cigarette—are plain and dull with walls as unadorned as those in barrack rooms, and carpeted with stuff which is cheap and threadbare, inadequately concealing the bare boards.

Such a room was Alan Fergusson's, but slightly better than most. A writing desk stood in one corner; a desk on which were placed two telephones, one connected with the house, the other with the outside exchange. Another table betrayed the nature of the man who occupied the room. It was, in these surroundings, almost grotesquely pleasant to the eye, that table, for on it were scattered several small curios grouped round a central figure. A quaint and ugly little figure this, known to collectors as a Hottentot Venus, but the prize of the collection and very dear to the heart of Alan Fergusson.

The telephone bell rang sharply. The room was empty, but only for a moment. Jeans, porter to St. Timothy's for many years, came hurrying in, wiping his mouth with the back

of his hand. He hastened across towards the telephone and, as he approached it, remarked to the air at large, reprovingly:

"All right, all right. Can't a man have 'is elevens?" He sat down in Alan's chair and picked up the receiver. "'Ullo! 'Ullo-ullo-ullo—Hullo!" He sighed resignedly. "They ring for yer," he said in disgust, "then they forgets about yer. Reminds me of the Army. They takes yer in with a shilling and a kiss and they sends yer out without a bob and a suit." He smiled to himself, pleased with his remark and making a mental note of it in order to repeat it later. But he had little time to enjoy his jest. Abruptly he shot upright in his chair.

"Don't buzz! I'm not a bee'ive! *H*ullo! Mr. Fergusson? He ain't 'ere. Oh, yes, 'e's in the 'orspital, but 'e's upstairs doing his rahnds. All right, I'll tell him. Who shall I say? 'Ere, miss, yer've cut us off—'ere. This is a 'orspital, this is."

For a moment he remained motionless, but no further sounds came from the instrument. Aggrieved he replaced the receiver and rose to his feet just as the door opened and Alan Fergusson stood on the threshold of the room.

"Someone for me, Jeans?"

"There was, sir, but they've cut us off, sir."

Fergusson laughed cheerfully.

"All the better. Come on in, Billy, and that will do, Jeans. I can see to the telephone now."

"Very good, sir."

Jeans stood aside to allow Dr. Blyth and a sister to enter the room, and then left it, shutting the door behind him. Fergusson moved over to the desk and sat down. Billy Blyth, looking as if he had just stepped out of Standing's Sixth—although he had left with his friend Alan Fergusson some years before—walked over beside Alan, moved the telephones slightly to one side and sat on the edge of the strong, but ugly, piece of furniture. The sister remained where she was, just inside the room.

The smile left Alan's face and for a moment he frowned; then he looked up.

"Now tell me exactly how number six, King's Ward, was found, sister."

"He was brought in by a police ambulance, sir."

"In that comatose state, of course."

"Yes, sir. Dr. Blyth saw him at once."

She turned her head towards Blyth, who nodded in confirmation.

"He was just as he is now, Alan. Hasn't batted an eyelid."

Fergusson looked at him.

"A constable came with him, I suppose? Did he say anything, Billy?"

"He said he watched him walk up the street and thought he was drunk—he staggered so—walked in zigzags, according to him. Then, when he was considering whether to run him in or not, he saw him collapse all in a heap, went up to him and found him as he is now."

"How long had the constable been watching him?"

"He didn't say," replied Blyth.

"What street was it, and how far had he come down it before he fell, do you know?"

Billy smiled.

"Sorry. I've told you all that the arm of the law told me. He may have had the details in his official notebook."

Fergusson did not answer the smile.

"Damn," he said slowly. "I wish I knew."

Timidly the sister volunteered the information.

"He came down Wimpole Street, sir."

Fergusson looked up quickly.

"How do you know?"

Sister Burke restrained a smile as best she could. Billy Blyth, watching her with interest, noticed approvingly the appearance of an attractive dimple, but Fergusson had no eyes for such things. He was absorbed in this mysterious case which had been brought to the hospital in the early hours of that morning and which was causing him grave anxiety.

"I had to show the constable out, sir," said the sister.

This time Fergusson did smile.

"Oh, and I gather the arm of the law relaxed?"

Billy Blyth noticed a faint flush on the cheeks of Sister Burke, noticed it with admiration.

"The arm of the law relaxed? Not a bit of it, Alan. I should say it tried to establish a closer personal relationship." He turned to

the sister and spoke with mock severity. "Is this your idea of discipline, Sister Burke? I'm astonished at you."

Fergusson laughed.

"It seems effective in getting at facts, Billy. Do you mean that the patient in King's Ward fell in Wimpole Street, sister?"

"No, sir. He turned out of Wimpole Street apparently, and collapsed just in Queen Anne Street."

"You can't tell me exactly where? What I want to get at is how far he managed to walk before he collapsed?"

"Well, sir, from what I understood, nearly to the corner of Harley Street."

Fergusson frowned.

"But he didn't walk all down Wimpole Street and then up Queen Anne Street before collapsing, surely?"

"He came out of a house about three doors up Wimpole Street, the constable said."

"Three doors from Queen Anne Street?" Billy spoke excitedly. "But that's where old Webb hangs out."

The mention of Jarvis Webb's name came with a jar to Alan Fergusson. In his preoccupation with his work, in particular the strange case which was exercising his brain at the moment, he had completely forgotten the state in which he had left his friend the previous evening. He realized that by now he should have rung up and ascertained, if possible, in what condition of mind Jarvis Webb found

himself that morning. He made a mental note that he would do so as soon as the opportunity occurred. At the moment his energies were fully occupied.

"Jarvis Webb," said Alan quietly, "shares the place with some umpteen other consultants and one dentist. I expect it was the dentist's our patient had been visiting. Surely no doctor would let him go out in that state."

"At that time of night?" said Billy, "Or rather—morning?"

"It's possible," said Alan quickly. "Supposing he had been a friend, a personal friend, or a patient who was in very great pain? Most doctors or dentists will do their best at any time of the night or day."

"I don't see what you're getting at," said Billy. "Seems odd to me. Are you suggesting that the shock of having a tooth pulled would be enough to bring on this fit?"

"No," said Alan doubtfully. "It usually takes a great deal of excitement."

Billy laughed.

"I have known patients biff dentists over the eye and bite them."

Alan smiled.

"Intense *mental* agitation I meant. These cerebral attacks——"

He paused.

"Yes," said Billy. "Poor beggar."

But it was unlike Dr. William Blyth, just as it had been unlike Billy Blyth of Standing, to look on the black side of things for long.

There had nearly always been a silver lining to every cloud that came into Billy's vision.

"Anyway," he said cheerfully, "gives you a chance to operate."

Sister Burke, excited in spite of herself out of her usual professional calm, took a step forward.

"Are you going to try your new operation, sir?"

Alan, who was unable to resist a feeling of pleasure at the enthusiasm of his subordinates, answered quickly:

"It's the only thing to do, sister. You can see the poor fellow's got no other chance."

"I thought he was going when I went on duty this morning," remarked Sister Burke musingly.

Alan spoke quickly.

"We've done everything possible, bar the operation. I think the only thing to do now is to operate at once."

"Undoubtedly," said Billy.

Alan was silent for a moment; then he turned to the sister.

"Run up to the theatre, sister, would you mind, and tell them I'll operate in half an hour."

For a second Sister Burke hesitated; then she ventured an unusual request.

"Mr. Fergusson, do you think I could attend? I know I'm not the theatre sister, but . . ."

Alan cut her short.

"Yes. I think you'd better. After all, you helped me with the other three."

"Thank you so much."

Something in her manner, something in her whole-hearted enthusiasm stirred a note of warning in Alan's mind.

"It may not succeed, sister," he said quietly.

But Sister Burke would have none of it. She spoke brightly.

"It *will* succeed. Haven't you done it three times already?"

Billy Blyth laughed.

"Anything you do in the surgical line, Alan," he said quickly, "succeeds."

Alan, gratified in spite of himself, was unable to restrain a smile.

"Thanks, both of you. Certainly it's a heaven-sent chance to operate."

"It's a gift of the gods, old man," said Billy, quietly.

Sister Burke left the room and Alan looked up at his friend.

"I must say I wish we knew who the man is and whom his relations are, Billy. You know the hospital law. No one can be operated on without the full consent of the patient, or, as in this case when he is unconscious, the written consent of the nearest relative. It's a risk, you know, operating without any authority."

Billy laughed. He was not one to attach much importance to the letter of the law at any time, least of all when a man's life hung in the balance.

"You can't wait for that. It's now or never. He'll be a goner if you don't operate within the hour."

Alan nodded.

"I'm afraid so, but for all that I do think we should try to find out something about him."

"But he hadn't a name or paper of any sort on him," remonstrated Billy. "Never saw a chap with emptier pockets. He's worse than I used to be on Friday nights."

Alan smiled. Billy Blyth was incorrigible.

"No marks on his underclothes?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"No laundry marks?"

"Everything was brand new."

"It's odd, you know, Billy; all new things and yet nothing in his pockets."

"He had a few coppers."

Fergusson nodded.

"No notes, though, or silver."

He paused for a moment, buried in thought, then suddenly he spoke very seriously.

"Nothing that could be traced."

Billy Blyth saw the trend of his friend's thoughts and realized on what line his mind was working.

"By Jove, that's true," he said, "What d'you make of it, Alan?"

"I don't know what to make of it. Looks almost as if he intended to—disappear."

"Suicide, Alan?"

"Well, one doesn't like to say these things. After all, the man's terribly ill, but it's so

astonishingly odd, the whole thing. I hate to say it, but I can't help feeling that it looks as if he'd made preparations for suicide and then this fit, or whatever it is, seized his brain and cut his intentions short."

"I've got an idea," said Billy quietly. "Do you think he'd escaped from somewhere?"

"I don't know," Alan spoke thoughtfully, "But I must say I think we ought to tell the police."

Billy Blyth shook his head.

"No time," he said. "Let them know afterwards if you like, but you must operate, old chap."

"Oh, of course," said Alan. "It's the only chance for him, I know. Billy, you'd better go and get him ready."

Billy was quick to take up his cue.

"Very good, Alan."

He rose from the desk and moved towards the door, but Alan stopped him. An idea had come to his brain; an idea which pleased him. Supposing they were to ring up Jarvis Webb? Webb was a surgeon, Webb had displayed great interest in Alan's three previous operations, indeed had insisted that he should be present at the next one. Nothing could be more providential. Webb could not fail to be vitally interested; could not fail to forget, for a while at least, the misery that had come to him.

Alan turned to Blyth.

"Billy," he said. "Why don't we ring up old Webb? Do you remember, he asked if

he might come and see the next one, and, quite apart from that, if this man really came out of his place he may be able to tell us who he is."

"That's an idea," said Billy. "Besides he'll be so jolly interested to know you're doing the operation on this chap. I expect he'll want to come and see it anyway, if he can get away."

"I wish he would."

Alan spoke feelingly. What could be better than this operation to take Webb's mind away from the immediate past. Instead of the mild resentment with which he had regarded the strange case brought to St. Timothy's that morning, he now began to feel thankful for the man's sudden appearance.

"I'd like old Webb here," he went on. "Let's see—what is his number?"

He picked up a card which was lying on his desk and looked down the list of numbers frequently used.

"Harley 6842. It would be a funny coincidence if this man really is a patient of Jarvis's, wouldn't it?"

Billy smiled.

"I shouldn't put too much hope on that, Alan. He'd have rung us up, you know. He'd have known you'd be keen. Why, he's been as anxious as I have for you to get just such a chance as this."

"He may have rung us up," said Alan suddenly. "There was a 'phone call for me, Jeans said, and they cut us off."

He lifted the receiver and gave the number.

For a little time he waited patiently and then rattled the hook.

"They're a devil of a time," he said. "Hullo! Can't you get Harley 6842? No reply? But it's a doctor's. They're sure to reply. Try again, please. Thanks!"

There followed a pause. The two friends were deep in their own thoughts, but suddenly to Alan, who held the receiver at his ear, a voice came over the line.

"Hullo! That you, Benson? Mr. Fergusson speaking. Can I speak to Mr. Webb, please? What d'you say? I can't hear—speak plainly."

He remained silent for a while, listening intently, and gradually a look of incredulity which immediately gave place to horror overshadowed his face. To Billy, who watched him in amazement, he seemed to age ten years. Something disastrous must have happened, something grim and appalling to cause such a look. The atmosphere of the room became tense and Billy gripped his hands together nervously, apprehensive of he knew not what; waiting for Alan to speak.

"*Good God!*"

The horror in Alan's voice was unmistakable. Billy jumped to the table.

"What's the matter?"

But Alan paid no attention. He was continuing his conversation.

"When she went in to clean the room? You mean, early this morning?"

He spoke in utter consternation. Billy,

thoroughly wrought up, could not resist an interruption.

"What *is* it?"

But again Alan paid no attention to him.

"Yes. Do, please. Thanks."

Slowly he put down the receiver and turned to his friend.

"Billy—Jarvis Webb is dead!"

"*What*—but when?"

"The housemaid found him when she went in early this morning to dust his consulting room."

"But what was it? Heart? He wasn't a heart case!"

Alan shook his head.

"Benson says it looks like suicide."

For a moment neither spoke, but then Billy Blyth could stand the silence no longer. He spoke incredulously.

"*Suicide?* Old Webb?"

"The pistol," said Alan soberly, "was found on the floor by his side."

6

The two friends stared at each other in horrified silence. Alan Fergusson's mind was racing. He thought of his lunch with the dead man on the previous day, that lunch when, haltingly recounted as another's case, Jarvis Webb had told him of his troubles. He thought later of the broken man with whom he had

dined; of those few moments of lucidity which had come suddenly to the brandy befogged brain of his friend enabling him to make his revelation. He thought of his own poor efforts to comfort the agonized mind and of the relief with which he had left that house—so soon after a house of tragedy—on the previous night; relief brought about by the belief that, at least temporarily, all was well with Webb.

Billy Blyth's voice broke in upon his thoughts.

"Good God! Old Webb!"

Fergusson nodded.

"I know. Somehow it doesn't seem like him."

"It's not a damn bit like him," said Blyth emphatically, "and besides, he was engaged to be married."

Alan Fergusson looked up with a start. How much did Billy know? It was important that he should find out for, although he knew that Jarvis Webb's secret would be safe enough with Billy, yet he might have to make it clear that any reference to that engagement might prove a tactical mistake, having regard to the dead man's reputation. He determined to probe his friend to find out, if possible, the extent of his knowledge.

"Could that have gone wrong in any way?" he asked.

Billy Blyth looked at him in surprise.

"I scarcely think so. He was very fond of her. Why, the last time I had dinner with him he bored me stiff raving about her."

"What was her name? Do you know?" asked Alan, cautiously.

"Betty—somebody."

"You don't think she could have chucked him?"

"May have!" Billy hesitated. "But even then—*suicide!* Old Webb!"

Alan spoke slowly.

"I know. But look here, Billy. I didn't tell you because . . . well, it didn't seem decent to tell anyone, but I . . . er . . . saw him yesterday."

"You did? Where?"

"Bodega."

He paused.

For a moment Billy mastered his impatience, but Alan seemed in immediate danger of again losing himself in his thoughts.

"Well, why not? He often used to go there."

"I know. I used to meet him there. As a matter of fact we had lunch together. I don't drink myself in the middle of the day, as you know, Billy. Can't work afterwards, but . . ." he paused and hesitated.

"Well?"

"Jarvis had had several . . ."

Billy looked at his friend and noticed the serious expression. For a moment he felt sceptical, but from the tone of Alan's voice there could be no mistake as to his meaning. Billy whistled gently through his teeth.

"*Not* like old Webb."

"No! I was . . . er . . . worried. I took it upon myself to warn him about it."

"Did he resent it?"

"No. He said nothing. I left him then, but I met him later."

"In the street somewhere?"

"No, Billy. I made an appointment with him, as a result of what he told me at lunch, to go and dine with him. He wanted . . . company, I think. He . . . well, something had gone wrong with the engagement, you see, and it affected him . . . hit him hard."

Again Alan hesitated. How much would it be advisable to say? Not much more, he thought, but on the other hand it was essential that Billy should know just how far he could talk on the subject and a certain knowledge was vital. Abruptly he made up his mind.

"When I went back to the Bodega that night, last night," Alan said quietly and very seriously, "I was met by Antonio. He told me that Jarvis had been waiting for me . . . I gathered, waiting some time. He warned me that Jarvis was . . . rather drunk."

Billy Blyth emitted another quiet whistle.

"Not like old Webb."

"No. But he'd an excuse, I think, if ever a man had an excuse in this world. He had a lucid moment and he told me that he'd . . . killed a patient that afternoon."

"*Killed?*"

"That was the word he used. He had to operate and his hand was shaking."

"Good God!"

"Yes—and so you see it might be suicide after all."

"Poor old Jarvis."

The words escaped Billy Blyth's sympathetic heart, but then both men paused; both men felt awkward. The sudden death of a good friend, or even a close companion, is a thing about which it is difficult to speak. Both men felt this in spite of their proximity to death in the course of their work, but this death, presumably self-inflicted, moved them still more, particularly Alan Fergusson who knew so much of the inside facts of the case. Suddenly he began to speak, but to the listening Blyth it was obvious that his words were more for himself than for his friend.

"I wish I'd stayed with him last night and got him to talk, to tell me the whole story, but . . . I was tired. You remember, I'd been up the night before."

"Two nights running, weren't you?" broke in Billy quietly.

Alan Fergusson nodded.

"I wish to God I'd stayed with him, poor old Jarvis. I cut him short, you know. He was trying to tell me about it, but he was very drunk by then. He'd had the better part of a bottle of brandy. In his excited state, of course, it went to his head at once. As a matter of fact I did take him home. I saw him to bed . . . thought he was all right. He was fast asleep when I left."

He hesitated for a moment, then when he continued he spoke briskly.

"Well, this won't bring him back. Did you give that chap in Queen's Ward his injection?"

Billy was quick to take up his cue. He realized that Alan Fergusson was more moved than he cared to acknowledge, and that the subject was now to be dropped.

"Yes. Temp.'s normal to-day."

"Good. I . . ."

A knock at the door interrupted his remark. A moment later Jeans entered. Alan looked at him irritably.

"Well, what is it, Jeans?"

"Detective-Inspector, sir, from Scotland Yard."

Alan looked at Billy interrogatively, puzzled for a moment, wondering what fresh excitement this portended. But then the obvious explanation came to him.

"Oh, of course. He's called for that analysis I expect. Get it handy, Billy. Show him in, Jeans."

Rather relieved at the opportunity to get away for a moment and to adjust his rather scattered thoughts, Billy Blyth promptly left the room in search of an analysis which had been made at the request of the police. Quickly finding what he required he was back in Alan's room before Jeans had returned with the inspector.

"Here it is."

"Good," said Alan.

Another knock at the door preceded Jeans, who stood aside to allow a tall, thin man in plain clothes to enter.

"The Inspector, sir."

Alan Fergusson looked up.

"You have called for the . . . why, look who it is, Billy!"

Billy Blyth turned round sharply.

"Good Lord," he cried, "can it be Hacker?"

"Remove the doubt . . . it is," came the reply in the well-remembered sombre tones.

The years that had elapsed since his departure from Standing had laid their imprint on Hackness considerably more than on the other two. His features were even more sharp and pointed; his complexion more sallow and the look of discontent which had been ever present on the face of the schoolboy had become intensified into an habitual sullenness.

"Gosh," said Billy, a friendly smile on his good-natured face. "Not seen you since we all left Standing together."

Hackness had advanced to the desk. Fergusson had risen and they shook hands quietly. Billy's reference to Standing brought an atmosphere of awkwardness into the room. The passing years had not quite erased the unhappy memory of that last term; that last occasion on which Hackness had come face to face with Alan. The three men were silent for a moment, a sense of embarrassment preventing their speech. Hackness was the first to overcome this feeling, and when he spoke

his voice was as unemotional as it had always been.

"Fergusson—Blyth! Gave you a bit of a surprise to see me, eh?"

"I'll say it did, old man," Billy laughed. "What are you doing in Scotland Yard?"

Hackness shrugged his shoulders.

"I was in the Secret Service during the war, and as the old man's bit of money got badly depleted I was glad to take any chance, but I was lucky. I hadn't done so badly perhaps, so my chance came with the police force."

"But I thought you had to start as a plain bobby," said Billy, "holding up the traffic and what not!"

Alan Fergusson noted a faint flush on Hackness's face, realized the tactlessness of Billy's remark, and quickly tried to cover it.

"Very sporting of you, Hacker, and you've done well, I imagine, an inspector already?"

"Detective-inspector. Yes. It's not bad, I suppose, but tell me about yourselves."

It was Fergusson's turn to feel a little awkward.

"Oh, interesting work, of course. So's yours, but I say—this is an occasion. Where's that bottle, Blyth? Where did you secrete it last time?"

Billy Blyth moved quickly to a cupboard and produced three glasses, a siphon and a bottle as if by magic. He hastily poured out the drinks and handed them round.

"Thanks," said Hackness. "You haven't done badly, you two."

"Old Alan's done wonders," laughed Billy. "Naturally. Always was the bright boy, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said Hackness quietly. "I hear you've become an authority on diseases of the brain, Fergusson."

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"One must be a specialist these days."

"Made some discovery, haven't you?"

"I should say he has," said Billy Blyth, enthusiastically. "New operation, Hacker, and I should say it's done the trick in all three cases."

Fergusson broke in quickly. He detested talking of his work, detested being held up as a sort of genius.

"Three cases," he said quietly, "are not sufficient to prove the efficacy."

"No," said Billy, "but you've a fourth to-day—and a peach of a case too."

"Interesting," said Hackness politely.

He was looking round the room with that odd, quick glance which he had possessed even as a schoolboy. His eyes came to rest on the incongruous table and he walked over to it. For a moment or two he remained standing in silence looking at the curios.

"I see you haven't lost your love of novelties, Fergusson. What's this weird-looking object?"

"That?" said Alan quietly. "That's a zebra's tail you're playing with."

But Hackness had already replaced it and had taken in his fingers the oddly shaped Hottentot Venus.

"Good God! What's this?"

Alan Fergusson could not prevent a note of satisfaction from creeping into his voice.

"Oh, that's *really* valuable. What an eye you have, Hacker. That's a Hottentot Venus—if it conveys anything to you."

"*That*—a Venus! That monstrosity!"

"Hottentot," smiled Fergusson. "She's the pride of my collection."

"I should have thrown her on the rubbish heap."

"Why," broke in Billy, alarmed at this directness of speech, knowing full well how his friend cherished this pet piece. "Why, she's worth I don't know how much. A king's ransom, eh, Alan?"

"They're very rare."

Hackness turned his head. When he spoke there was, perhaps, a tinge of envy in his voice.

"If she's worth as much as that you must be worth a bit to have bought her."

There was something about Hackness's whole attitude which rather irritated Alan, but he remembered the very similar irritation which he used to feel at Standing for an identical reason and he suppressed it, realizing that it might possibly be an old prejudice reasserting itself.

"I didn't buy her," he said quietly. "She was given to me."

Billy Blyth was quick to take up the story.

"Grateful patient," he cried. "Old Silas T. Moore, the copper king. Three doctors were

arguing about him, and Alan there just whipped out his knife and operated on him. When old Moore recovered consciousness he said old Alan ought to have been an American, and gave him that."

"He took all sorts of trouble to get her for me," said Alan quietly. "Awfully good of him."

"Well," said Hackness, replacing the small object on the table, "if I'd had the luck to save the life of a copper king I'd have expected something better than that."

He turned and came back to the desk. Alan, who had reseated himself, looked up at him.

"Don't want to hurry you, old fellow," he said, "but as it happens I have an operation to perform almost immediately and I can't stop to chat at the moment."

"Neither can I," said Hackness shortly, "I came in for the report on that . . ."

Billy Blyth had picked up the bottle.

"Is this Exhibit A. in the coming *cause célèbre?*"

"Oh, no," laughed Hackness, "only manslaughter."

"Only?"

Hackness smiled.

"No particular kudos to be got out of it. I never get a good murder case."

"We didn't know we were analysing this for you, Hacker."

"Well, you weren't—not really. It's the department. I must be off."

Again Alan Fergusson felt that sense of discord, once again it occurred to him that it was the old prejudice reasserting itself—a thing to be suppressed.

"Look in another day, will you, Hacker? Sorry, I feel I've been inhospitable, but I'm very busy."

"Thank you," said Hackness, "I will if I've time."

As he spoke the telephone bell rang sharply. Billy Blyth, nearest to the instrument, lifted the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes, Dr. Blyth speaking."

Hackness turned to Alan.

"Sorry but I must be off. Can't wait, Billy."

Billy looked up, still speaking into the instrument.

"Yes. He's here now. Hold on, Hacker. It's for you."

"For me?"

Billy nodded.

"From the Yard—or something equally important."

Hackness returned to the desk and took the telephone from Billy's hands.

"Hullo! Oh, yes, sir."

His manner changed noticeably. Normally curt and abrupt, it now became distinctly less aggressive. A humbler note entered his voice. He spoke deferentially as a subordinate to his superior officer.

"Right, sir. I'll go along at once. What

address? 976, Wimpole Street? Right you are, sir."

He replaced the receiver. Something had happened to him in that conversation. He was obviously brighter, obviously more cheerful. He smiled at Alan Fergusson.

"Odd that should have come through just as I had been saying I never got a good murder case."

But Alan's whole attitude had changed also.

"A murder at 976, Wimpole Street?" he said quickly.

"Yes. I'm to take the case. My first real chance. Can't wait."

He moved quickly towards the door but Billy Blyth, rather white in the face, called after him.

"Hold on, Hacker. We know a man at that address. At least—we did. A fellow called Jarvis Webb."

Hackness turned. This time he spoke with interest.

"You knew Mr. Webb?"

"We were at Trinity," said Alan quickly, "and afterwards at St. Timothy's together, all three of us, Webb, Billy and I, but we heard just now that Webb had . . . er . . . committed suicide."

"Oh," said Hackness, briskly, "who told you that?"

"His man, Benson, when I rang up just now."

"Well," said Hackness quietly. "It wasn't

suicide, thank God, or so the Divisional Surgeon says."

"Murder?"

Detective-Inspector Hackness nodded.

"Murder!"

7

Hackness was enjoying himself. The effect of his words was startling. Both Fergusson and Blyth seemed to be deeply affected. He watched them with pleasure: it was something, after all, to be an official of the police, to be able to wield such power over his fellows. But he knew he had no time to waste. This was his first murder case, his first really important trust: if he could only do well and get his man then his position at Scotland Yard would be assured. At the moment he was only an odd job man, he recognized ruefully. He had spoken but the truth to his two hosts when he had said that a good case never came his way. Within himself he shrewdly suspected that other cases were occupying those superior to himself at the Yard, and that his chance had come out of the blue because he was readily available. He preferred to think, however, that he was being tested out for future promotion, and in any event he knew that to bring this murder case to a successful conclusion—from the police point of view—would be to establish one foot

firmly on the ladder which eventually leads to an honoured position in that little room where the chiefs of Scotland Yard direct their war against the underworld.

"Can't wait," he said quickly.

But even as he spoke, so did Billy Blyth.

"Then I'll bet . . ."

But he got no further.

Fergusson looked up quickly from his desk and broke in on the sentence.

"Yes, you were right, Billy." He turned to the watching Hackness. "When we heard the news Billy declared that it could not be suicide. It seemed so unlike Webb as we knew him."

Hackness, trained to notice little things, sensed something strange in Fergusson's manner. He came back rather purposefully right into the room from his position by the door where he had been standing. He realized he was giving an impression of awakened interest and he wanted to give it. There was something here which might be of value, and the time which he would lose by this delay might be well repaid.

"What did you know about him?" he asked quickly.

Fergusson answered at once.

"Well, he was very keen on his job. No man so keen as that would kill himself."

"Is that all?"

A trace of disappointment crept into Hackness's voice as he spoke the words.

"Know anything about his circumstances?"

Fergusson did not reply; but, out of the corner of his eye, Hackness noticed that Billy Blyth looked sharply at his friend. The Inspector rapped out another question:

"Was he a married man?"

"Bachelor," said Fergusson briefly.

"Any money troubles?"

"None—that I know of."

"Any troubles of any sort?"

Hackness cast a shrewd glance at Blyth as he asked the question, but Billy was now apparently taking little interest in the conversation. He had turned away and the Inspector could not see the expression on his face. Fergusson hesitated a moment before replying.

"He . . . er . . . lost a patient under the knife the other day," he said at last. "Took it rather to heart, I think, but of course we are all apt to have our failures."

Hackness stopped him with a gesture. He knew now that he had been right to wait. He knew now that there was a chance of ferreting out something which might be of value provided he could keep Fergusson on the subject and evade being side-tracked into a generalization on the surgical profession. Hackness was cunning enough to sense that it was just that side-track into which Fergusson desired he should be led.

"How did that happen?" he asked shortly.

Fergusson replied indifferently, and Hackness

felt that the indifference was just a trifle overdone.

"Heart failure, I suppose. That's usually the reason—not the surgeon's fault necessarily, you know."

"Possibly not," said Hackness. "I'd better look into that. Who was the patient?"

Rather to the surprise of the Inspector, Fergusson did not reply to this question. It was Billy Blyth who answered.

"God knows!"

Hackness turned on him sharply.

"I'm not addressing prayers to the Almighty. I'm asking you. Well, who was he?"

Very much on the alert, Hackness caught a quick glance from Blyth towards Alan, as he answered:

"Haven't the least idea."

But the Inspector quickly took his cue. He turned on Fergusson.

"*You* know, Fergusson. You may as well tell me. I shall find it out in any case."

For a moment Alan paused. It was an awkward moment. Then, quickly, he made up his mind.

"I really don't know much, Hackness," he said quietly, "but I happened to meet Webb yesterday and he told me. It was a woman, by the by, and . . . well, he was terribly upset about it. But that points to suicide rather than to murder."

"Then it was Webb's fault that his patient died?"

"How can one say?" Alan shrugged his shoulders. "We surgeons aren't infallible, though you ordinary mortals seem to think we ought to be. He may not have been to blame. He was in a nervy state at the time I saw him and may have exaggerated."

"What made him nervy?"

Again Alan made no reply. Hackness half turned.

"Oh, all right; I'll ask his man."

"Damn you, Hackness," Fergusson spoke irritably. "You're just the same inquisitive little boy you used to be at Standing."

Hackness smiled to himself. He was succeeding, then. If he could only drive Fergusson out of his normal composure something really useful might come through his lips unawares. But when he spoke his voice betrayed none of his inward triumph.

"That's rude, Fergusson, and silly too. It's my job to find out things about a man who's been murdered, and, as I said, if you won't tell me I can find someone else who will."

He turned towards the door as if to leave the room, but Fergusson's voice came to him over his shoulder.

"Oh, have it your own way. His girl had chucked him, if you want to know . . . and it had hit him . . . hard."

Hackness stopped at the door and looked back.

"Then he was engaged to be married?"

"Yes."

There was still a note of irritation in the surgeon's voice; a note for which Hackness was waiting, which he wanted to hear.

Fergusson continued quickly.

"I don't know her name, at least not all of it. Her Christian name was Betty, but, as I say, all that looks more like suicide than murder."

Hackness turned round and faced him.

"Still, one doesn't know. Might be some relative of that girl Betty."

"Why should it be when *she* chucked *him*?" said Alan impatiently. "There was no question of him behaving badly, I gather."

"Operation nothing to do with the girl?"

Hackness shot the question at him, but this time Fergusson was not to be drawn.

"I'm afraid he . . . er . . . he wasn't himself when he operated. It had that much to do with the girl."

"Oh," said Hackness quickly. "Drugs?"

Fergusson could no longer restrain himself.

"Damn it, man," he burst out. "You're speaking of a friend, and Billy and I are pretty cut up at his death, I can tell you."

Hackness remained silent at the door, a smile playing about his lips, but a smile so faint that from the distance it was not noticeable either to Billy Blyth or Alan Fergusson. When he spoke it was in a much more pleasant tone. The police officer seemed at last to have given way to the old schoolfellow.

"Sorry, Fergusson. You must excuse me,

but . . . I'm keen, you see. First big case. Well, I'll be off to my job. If anything interesting turns up I suppose you'd like to know?"

"We should," said Fergusson, dryly. "Thanks."

Hackness turned towards the door, but Billy, noticing the package on the table, called to him.

"Here, you're forgetting this."

"Oh," said Hackness. He paused for a moment. "I wonder if you could send it on to the Yard, could you? It will save me a great deal of trouble. I can't very well take it to Wimpole Street with me."

Fergusson nodded towards Blyth.

"Yes. That will be all right, Hacker. We'll see that it's sent."

"Right," said Hackness. "Thanks very much. So long."

He was out of the door and gone before they could reply.

There was a long pause after the door had closed. Billy Blyth looked at his friend and saw that he was preoccupied, but after a minute, unable to stand the strain of that silence any longer, Billy spoke:

"Well, of all things! Hacker at Scotland Yard!"

But Fergusson did not reply. He was deep in thought, too concentrated probably even to hear the words of his friend. Suddenly he looked up.

"Just run along to the theatre, Billy. See if everything is ready, then you might get the patient all set for the operation."

Blyth, who had been sitting on the corner of the desk, rose to his feet.

"By Jove, Alan," he said, "he came out of Webb's house in a state of great excitement. You said nothing less than that would cause that fit. What if . . . ?"

But Fergusson interrupted him quickly.

"Let the Yard do their own dirty work, Billy. It's no business of ours. Our job is to operate and give our patient a chance of his life."

For a moment Billy looked dubious but, realizing that this was not the right time to pursue the subject, he turned to the door.

"Righto!—and, thank goodness, it's a chance for the operation anyway. I'll come back and let you know."

He left the room quickly.

Fergusson remained motionless at his desk. His brain was in a whirl, full of wild conjectures as to the tragic connection which lay between the man on whom he was about to operate and his friend, Jarvis Webb. Had this man come out of the surgeon's house? Had he killed him? And, if so . . . what ought Alan to do? He had a deep inner conviction, which persisted in spite of all his attempts to stifle it, that his duty lay in putting all the facts, as he knew them, before the police. This knowledge might be

invaluable; might, indeed, point the way to an immediate arrest. But . . . it was this which made him halt—the word 'arrest.' For the police would leave not a stone unturned to discover the motive behind this murder—and suppose that motive brought to light things which would be better left hidden; things which, become public property, would cause Jarvis Webb's reputation to be torn to shreds and tatters by an unsympathetic world? His face was very white and strained as he wrestled with the problem. If only he had one clue as to the reason for the murder . . . his way would be clear. But at present he was groping blindly, groping in a fog of vague fears and doubts, the only certainty in this perplexing gloom being the fact that Jarvis Webb had got something to hide and that the dead man's good repute was at stake.

Suddenly the telephone bell rang sharply and jerked him out of his troubled thoughts. Listlessly Fergusson lifted the receiver.

"Hullo! Yes. Mr. Fergusson speaking. Yes, two injections, please, sister. One now and one in two hours' time. How's that concussion case doing? Thanks."

He was replacing the receiver, but suddenly remembered.

"Oh, hullo, sister. Yes, wait a moment please. I wanted to hear if the boy in Queen's Ward kept down that broth? He did? Good. Yes, please. Not too soon, though—yes, about two will do. Thank you, sister. All ready

for the operation? Well, I'll be up in about a quarter of an hour."

He replaced the receiver and buried himself in a turmoil of anxious thoughts. Jarvis Webb's face, wild and agitated, as he had last seen it, rose up before him and he felt an agony of anger and sorrow overwhelm him. Why should not his murder be avenged, his destroyer brought to justice? But . . . might not this be doing Webb some further harm; might not this result in scandal and disgrace attaching to his name? As before, his mind reverted again to the vital questions. What connection lay between the dead man and his patient? What was the murderer's motive for killing Jarvis Webb?

But these unspoken questions which were drumming in his brain were about to be answered, and in a manner which Alan Fergusson could not have foretold.

8

There came a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Alan automatically.

For a moment he did not look up, thinking perhaps that it was Billy Blyth come to warn him for the operation, but a respectful cough, a cough so throaty that it could come from only one man in the hospital, made him look up quickly.

"What is it, Jeans?"

"If you please, sir, it's a young lady."

Alan could not hide his look of surprise.

"You know I never see anyone!"

"Yes, sir," said Jeans quickly, "Beg your pardon, sir, but she's so awfully upset, sir, and——"

'Can't be helped." Alan interrupted impatiently. "You know I'm bound to make a strict rule."

"Yes, sir," said Jeans, "but really, sir, she . . ."

"Good God, man. You know the rule," Fergusson barked at him. "Kindly understand that I expect you to obey it."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Fergusson, but it isn't this man's fault, it's mine. I wouldn't take 'No' for an answer, you see."

Fergusson, taken aback, looked up. A girl had come into the room. She had advanced now between Jeans and himself, almost to the desk. He rose to his feet and as he did so his quick eye scanned her appearance.

That she was unusually beautiful he realized at once. She was smartly dressed in a perfectly cut costume and tiny felt hat, both of black. Her gloves, shoes, stockings and bag were all of the same funereal colour, but the general impression was one of chic and elegance and, at first glance, Fergusson did not appreciate that she was in mourning. But it was not at her clothes that he stared—but at her face. Although the most unimpressionable of men

as far as the fair sex was concerned, he was unable to remain unmoved by such unique beauty.

Tiny golden curls clustered underneath her hat; her skin was very white and creamy; her cheeks tinged with a dainty flush. But it was her eyes which were extraordinary, traitors to her Saxon colouring. Instead of blue they were of a curious greyish brown; arresting eyes which lent a subtle distinction to the face, and gave it great character and charm. Her mouth was small, and when she spoke Fergusson caught a glimpse of beautifully even teeth. There was an anxious, rather fearful, expression on her face at the moment, but suddenly she smiled and two dimples danced mischievously at the corners of her mouth. It was a very attractive smile, one which played not merely about her mouth but in the depths of those fascinating eyes and, for a moment, Fergusson stared at her in silence, lost to all else but the contemplation of her beauty.

Only for a moment, however; then a wave of annoyance drove all else away. He stared at her now in a mixture of anger and perplexity. What on earth was she doing here? Never had the hospital's rules been infringed before; never had anyone dared to break in upon him in this audacious manner. He felt intensely displeased and irritated. During the last hour he had been through a whole gamut of unhappy emotion and now . . . here was this girl. How was he to get rid of her? Short of physical

violence the question was beyond him. He stared at her in silence, a frown of displeasure clouding his brow.

9

"I am so sorry but I simply must see you."

The girl spoke anxiously as if she divined the thoughts which were passing through his mind and suspected that she might be ejected at any moment.

"You see . . . I am desperate."

Something in her tone repelled Alan Fergusson. He sensed that she was being theatrical for his benefit in order to impress. When he answered his manner was very stiff.

"I really cannot have my rules infringed, Miss . . . er . . . "

But the girl's quick glance had travelled round the room and was now resting on the table just beside her.

"Why," she cried suddenly, a note of enthusiasm in her voice. "You've got a magic staff. It's a zebra's tail, really, isn't it? I saw one just like it in Frankfort. The Jaspert collection, you know. Oh——" she gave a little scream, a little scream of enthusiasm which went straight to the collector's heart in Alan. "Here's a Hottentot Venus. Oh, how priceless!"

Alan Fergusson forgot his angry thoughts

of the moment before and in spite of himself was interested.

"Do you recognize it?"

"Of course I recognize it. Not that I've ever seen one before, but I've read heaps of descriptions. Fancy possessing one! Wherever did you get it?"

Fergusson smiled. He noted with pleasure the flush of enthusiasm which increased the dainty rose of her cheeks and heightened her charm still more.

"It was given to me," he said, "by a nice old American, Silas T. Moore."

"The copper king?"

"Yes." Alan laughed. "He's a self-made man, you know, and he thought because they're called Hottentot Venuses that they were African like those other things. But he took a heap of trouble to get it for me."

"He would have to. They're so rare—and it must have cost a fortune, too."

"It was most awfully good of him."

The girl looked round, looked straight at Alan and seemed to hold his eyes.

"I suppose he was a patient and that you had saved his life. You would. You look so kind, and I'm told you are so clever."

The note of flattery in her voice was obviously purposeful and her manner was now forced and rather embarrassed. The thought struck Alan that she had turned to the curios only to hide and overcome her previous embarrassment, and now that she realized that the ruse had

succeeded, her embarrassment had returned, was again visible. He stiffened at once at the flattery. In some way it aroused his distrust.

"Oho! my beauty," said Alan to himself. "So that's the game."

Once again he felt the wave of resentment which her presence had provoked and now became cold and professional.

"What did you want with me, Miss . . . er . . . ?"

She remained looking at him, but did not answer. Alan glanced up at the clock.

"I'm afraid you will have to excuse me. I've an operation in a few minutes."

"I know. That's . . . that's why I've come."

There was nothing theatrical, nothing dramatic about the girl now. She spoke perfectly naturally and from the tone of her voice Alan, accustomed to noticing such things, realized that she was suffering from some concealed anxiety, possibly distress, but he was amazed at her revelation. How on earth could the girl know anything about this operation? Possibly she was feigning, and he looked at her again carefully, surreptitiously, but there could be no mistaking that she was in the grip of some emotion, some emotion that she found it very difficult to control. He determined to try her out.

"I don't quite understand," he said quietly. "How can you know?"

"I've been up to King's Ward."

"King's Ward?"

"Yes."

Again that annoyance swept over Alan Fergusson. Who was this girl that she should make so free with the hospital in this astonishing manner? He spoke sharply.

"And Sister told you?"

"Not Sister. One of the other patients. They'd overheard something."

"But what were you doing in King's Ward, and why does this operation concern you?"

The girl paused for a second before replying. She drew herself up and looked straight at the surgeon who had now resumed his seat behind the desk.

"He is my brother!" she said softly, so low that the words scarcely came to Alan's ears.

For a long moment he looked at her, and for some seconds she managed to hold his eyes and control herself. Then, very suddenly, she bowed her head and Alan realized that she was struggling with her feelings, an emotion which she could not restrain. Abruptly he rose to his feet, but even as he did so he saw her dive one hand into her bag and pull out a handkerchief. There is nothing so utterly disarming to a man than to see a woman weep, particularly a young and attractive girl—such as his visitor had proved to be. Alan turned his back, moved quickly towards his chair and brought it round, placing it near to his desk, and by the time that he had

done this the girl had herself once more under control. She took the proffered chair and smiled gratefully through tear-laden eyes.

"I beg . . . your pardon."

Alan resumed his seat on the other side of the desk. The girl's breakdown had done what she had wanted to do with flattery, but failed to achieve. That he knew, but now did not care. His sympathy was aroused, and not only his sympathy but his interest. The valuable information as to the identity of his patient should now come to him; information which, he felt, might lead to a true solution of the mystery attaching to the man and the possible connection between him and the tragedy of Jarvis Webb. He looked up suddenly.

"I see. Well, I'm not sorry that you've come in one way. You know, of course, that it's a very serious case?"

The girl answered him quickly.

"Yes."

"Has your brother had these fits before?"

"One."

"Only one?"

She spoke tonelessly.

"Two days ago—when . . . when his wife died."

"Oh . . . your sister-in-law?"

Once again her feelings nearly overcame the girl.

"Winnie. Yes. It was—terrible for him. You see, he . . . loved her very much."

"Of course," said Alan Fergusson to himself,

but in his preoccupation he did not realize that he was talking aloud. "The agitation brought on a fit—but there would be some fresh excitement to cause this second fit."

He looked up.

"The first, of course, wasn't so bad?"

The girl answered quickly.

"Oh, no, he didn't stay unconscious like this."

"No—he wouldn't. I can't disguise from you, Miss—er . . . ?"

"My name is Adams."

"Miss Adams, that his condition is extremely serious this time. In fact——"

The girl nodded.

"I know. This new operation of yours is his only chance."

"I'm afraid it is," said Alan quietly, "but it's a good chance, you know. I've done it before and, so far, successfully."

Again the girl nodded; again her voice was toneless.

"I know. Sister told me that you always succeed."

Alan smiled.

"You must make allowances for hospital enthusiasm, Miss Adams, but, at any rate, I think I may say that your brother has quite a good chance of his life."

"Yes," said the girl quietly. "That's—that's just what is so—awful."

Alan Fergusson stared at her. What on earth had happened? Had her nerves given

way leaving her temporarily insane? He leant forward.

"But—why? The operation will *cure* him—he won't have a return of these fits."

"No," said the girl, "he'll be sane—normal. He'll be—oh, my God!"

With an involuntary movement she covered her eyes with her hand.

"I'm sorry. I don't quite understand."

The girl looked up.

"Don't you see? It will drag him back to life—to suffer—oh, it's horrible."

So that's what she's getting at, thought Alan. A bit unstrung and no wonder. He spoke aloud.

"You mean he'll feel the death of his wife?—But that's a thing that can't be helped, my dear lady. We all have to——"

He stopped his words in mid-sentence. The girl was shaking her head at him, a very sad smile playing about her lips.

"I don't mean that," she said. "I mean something far worse, something . . . horrible. Oh—may I tell you? I came here to tell you——"

"Of course. If I can help I shall be only too pleased."

But, instinctively, Alan Fergusson looked at the clock. The girl noticed his glance.

"You are operating on him now?"

"In a few minutes."

Abruptly the girl leant across the desk and seized his hand.

"You mustn't . . . oh, you mustn't."

"But, my dear Miss Adams——"

Very gently Alan released his hand and sat back in his chair. The girl looked at him strangely.

"I know. You think I'm mad—hysterical—but tell me—if you had a brother would you want to see him cured—just to be . . . hanged?"

Startled, Alan Fergusson leant forward.

"I . . . I fail to see——"

But the girl gave him no time to think, for the moment. Hurriedly she continued to speak:

"Let me tell you. Let me tell you the whole story—you'll understand."

That was just what Alan Fergusson did not want to let her do. He began to understand a little too clearly now what the girl was explaining. He felt that he realized rather too well what she was going to say. The connection between Jarvis Webb and the unconscious man upstairs in King's Ward. What was it the murdered man had said to him only the day before? 'I've killed a woman.' And the next day he, himself, was killed. In revenge? This girl had said her brother would be hung if he recovered from the operation. Was it possible, then, that he . . .? But Fergusson refused to face the truth. He wanted to know no more of this terrible tragedy. At all costs the girl must be stopped. He had voiced this sentiment when, only a few moments before, he had told

Billy Blyth to leave Scotland Yard to do its own dirty work. He now spoke quickly:

"I'm awfully sorry, but you see . . . er . . . it's not really our business. We are bound to do the best we can for our patients."

The girl laughed and the sound was ugly.

"The best you can to make them well enough to be tried for murder—and then hanged?"

She laughed again, an uncontrolled laugh which echoed no sound of mirth but contained, all the same, more than a tinge of hysteria.

"Stop that!"

Alan's medical training had instinctively come to the fore.

"Sit down again, please."

He rose to his feet, quickly passed the desk, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Now, please. Ah, that's better."

The girl looked up at him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fergusson. Of course, you are quite right. That is your point of view, but—if you keep to it this time, well . . . I shall be guilty of two deaths, that's all. No—of three."

Fergusson looked at her searchingly. He was startled by her words, and was irritated with himself for being startled. Obviously she was still hysterical, although she gave no appearance of so being. Obviously she was talking at random.

"You? Nonsense. Please don't talk like that."

But the girl continued quietly now, but with a suppressed, a deep feeling which inspired conviction.

"You are thinking me hysterical, Mr. Fergusson, but I'm not. Not now. What I've just said is true. I've already been the cause of two deaths and, if my brother is hanged for murder, I shall morally be guilty of his, too. For it's my fault that his wife died. She died on the operating table, and it was I who caused the surgeon to . . . to——"

Suddenly she covered her face with her hands again.

"*Oh, God!*"

Fergusson looked at her and quietly made up his mind. He returned to his seat behind the desk and when he spoke his voice was kind, if serious.

"I think, perhaps, that after all you'd better tell me the whole tale."

"Yes," said the girl eagerly, "I must. I came here to do so. It's so . . . oh, how can I tell you. I . . . I . . . was engaged to be married to a friend of yours. To . . . Jarvis Webb."

The truth was out at last.

"You are . . . Betty?"

Although subconsciously he had known this for some time, known and fought against the knowledge, yet when it was an admitted fact the truth startled him. Well, he must be told everything now; clear up, once and for all, the ugly doubts and surmises which were

crowding his brain. He stared at her with an enquiring look; a look in which lay more than a hint of hostility.

"Betty Adams . . . yes. You knew Jarvis?"

"He was one of my greatest friends," said Alan quietly.

"You are the Alan Fergusson he often spoke of."

"He spoke to me of you."

The girl looked up at him.

"He was always saying that he would arrange for me to meet you. But he never did. I think he was jealous."

"Miss Adams!" Alan's voice was harsh.

"Oh, please! I'm not purposely speaking ill of the dead."

Alan looked up quickly. This was a surprising statement seeing how recent was the news. He stared at her with renewed interest.

"Then you know he is dead?"

"Yes," said the girl quietly. "You see . . . my brother killed him."

So that was it. Alan Fergusson forgot the presence of the girl, forgot all else in the turmoil of his thoughts. What a fool he had been. Obviously he should have realized the truth long before now, obviously he should have . . . But the girl's voice suddenly brought him back to reality.

"And if you bring Bob back to life and consciousness he'll be tried and . . . hanged for it."

For a moment there was a pause; and then

Alan Fergusson spoke and his voice was very hard.

"And why should he not be—if he killed Jarvis Webb?"

The girl leant forward.

"I know." Her voice was very low, so low that he could scarcely hear her words. "Oh, don't think I don't realize that. But don't you see—it was I who was to blame—not Bob. It was I who caused the whole trouble. It's not . . . oh, how shall I bear it, how shall I go on living with Bob, Jarvis and Winnie dead . . . and all through me!"

She suddenly buried her head in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably, the hard, difficult sobs of a heartbroken woman. The restraint she had been imposing on her nerves had given way; only tears could bring relief. Alan Fergusson watched her, sitting motionless in his chair. Her grief must find some outlet. Nothing could be better than for her to vent her sorrow in weeping. Too much self-control in cases like this led, inevitably, to a complete breakdown. He waited silently, hoping that when the fit was over she would be able to explain the many things which he must know in order to understand exactly how to proceed. After a few minutes, when she seemed to have recovered herself and was applying an inadequate piece of silk to her eyes, he spoke again.

"Why do you say that you caused this ghastly business?"

"Because I did." Her voice was firm now,

firm with resolve. "I am a fool, a silly vain fool, and when Jarvis was jealous I was too proud to explain. I let him think what wasn't true. You see, I didn't really love Jarvis Webb. I know I ought to have. He was fine—but there was someone else."

Alan could not prevent a hint of the contempt which he felt for her stealing into his voice.

"Then why did you get engaged to Webb?" he said. "For his money?"

But the girl answered simply.

"Oh no. I've plenty of money. I accepted Jarvis because . . . because I wanted *not* to go on loving someone else. You see, I knew this other man was a rotter, but we'd danced together and I loved him. Then I heard of him doing rotten things with elderly women who had money—and, well, my brother, Bob, and Winnie talked to me and urged me to drop him and I knew they were right. Then Jarvis Webb came along and asked me to marry him. And I did admire him and so—I said 'Yes' and told the other it was over."

Something in her frankness appealed to the inherent honesty of Alan Fergusson. When he spoke his voice was much more gentle, much more sympathetic.

"And I suppose this other fellow wouldn't accept his dismissal?"

"Yes," said the girl quietly, "at a price. He accepted it when Bob got him a job in Angola and paid his debts and passage money. You see, father had big plantations out there—

that's why I know about those things— " she nodded her head towards the curios—" and although dad had sold out, we knew the man who had bought the plantations—and he said he'd take him."

" Why didn't that end it? I suppose he found he couldn't stick it out there and came back. Is that it? "

" No. I got a wire from him on Tuesday to say he was back in England. In the afternoon he came to see me. I was all alone. Jarvis and the doctor were upstairs with Winnie, and Bob came later."

" Tuesday? "

" Yes—yesterday. They told me that Jarvis was going to operate on her."

" That afternoon? "

" Yes. It was urgent, so I was alone and this other man came suddenly, unexpectedly crept into the house without anybody knowing. He found me in Bob's study and told me a long tale about his sufferings in Africa—fever and all the rest of it. And I was silly enough to be distressed. But then suddenly he made a slip, and it began to dawn on me that he had never been to Africa at all. I taxed him with it and he laughed and didn't deny it. He had spent the money Bob gave him in Paris. Oh, I felt I could strike him, but he caught me in his arms and—kissed me—and—and Jarvis was outside looking at us from the window all the time."

" You mean that Webb misunderstood? "

The girl looked up at him and Alan was

surprised at her answer. It was so surprisingly honest in view of what he had heard from the lips of the dead man only the day before.

"Not altogether. You see . . . I . . . I was kissing him. I did love him. I couldn't help it, even in spite of everything, and when I felt his arms round me I forgot everything else for a moment."

"And then," said Alan, very gently, "I suppose Webb broke it off?"

"No," said the girl, "he never came near me, but the man who had me in his arms suddenly threw me away from him and said that he had seen Jarvis outside the window. I ran out . . . I tried to see Jarvis—" ("She probably did," said Alan to himself. "She's honest anyway. It's the sort of straightforward thing she would do. I like this girl in spite of all this. I can't help it. I like her") "—but I couldn't find him. I don't know what he did. I knew he was a very jealous person, and I suppose he lost his temper furiously and just went away. Oh, I know he had cause. So I went back. The other man had gone, coward that he is, and I was foolish and vain, I suppose, so . . . well, I took off his ring and put it in an envelope and sent it back to Jarvis."

"Why?" asked Alan.

"Why?" For a moment the girl looked at him wide-eyed. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Why did you send the ring back? Didn't you want to marry him any more?"

For a few moments the girl paused, deep in thought. Evidently she wanted to answer in perfect honesty, but found it difficult to put her feelings into words. Suddenly she looked up.

"I don't think I did—at the moment. I thought, you see, that he might have waited just a minute to give me a chance to explain."

"It's not easy to explain a thing like that," said Alan quietly, and he purposely made his voice cold and impersonal.

"Don't I know it," said the girl hotly, "but at least I might have been given a chance."

Again there was a pause; Alan realized that there was no use in pursuing this side of the matter any further. What was done was done, and all that concerned him was to arrive at the facts as quickly as possible. What criticisms he might have to offer with regard to conduct would be better kept to himself until he had time to think over the affair with all the facts before him.

"When did you send back this ring?" he asked.

"There again I was a fool," said the girl. "I sent it to him so that he must have received it at the nursing home."

"Before the operation?"

"Yes."

A wave of anger came over Alan as he sat there looking at this—a fragile girl—who had caused such terrible havoc.

"Good God!" he cried. "You seem to have timed things pretty beautifully."

His voice, his words were bitter, and the girl seemed to shrink for a moment, but then very quietly and very humbly she offered the only explanation she could give.

"I'm afraid I did, but I never said that anything I had done was well done. I came here to tell you the whole truth."

Alan smiled suddenly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Adams. It was wrong of me to say what I did. Will you please continue?"

"He was late for the operation, and while he was doing it Winnie died. One of the nurses told Bob afterwards that the surgeon was drunk."

Fergusson nodded.

"Webb told me that himself. He was terribly cut up, but you see he'd been up the night before with a case. He'd then been called to your house to see your sister-in-law and also his mind was fully occupied with what he had seen from the window."

"That was what caused it!"

It was almost a cry of anguish this, from the girl, but Alan Fergusson continued soberly:

"I'm . . . afraid so. Anyway he had had little food and was very tired. He wanted to pull himself together for the operation, so he turned into the Bodega—a little restaurant around here—to get a drink. I'm afraid . . . he overdid it."

"Yes," said Betty Adams, now quiet again. "It was all my fault, but when Bob heard what that rat of a nurse had to say it brought on a

sort of very minor fit. I took him home and saw him through it, leaving him asleep in bed, but this morning, when I went in early to see how he was there was no one there. I don't think he'd slept in the bed at all. He must have pretended to be asleep so that I should leave him, and went out almost immediately afterwards. Benson, that's Jarvis's man, rang me up and told me about his master."

"But Benson," said Alan quickly, "would have told you that it was suicide. He told me that."

With a sad smile Betty Adams shook her head.

"He said he thought it would pass as suicide, but he guessed the truth. You see, he had seen Bob go in the night before. He must have seen him pass the house, and he rang me up to caution me."

"Did he know your brother, then?"

"Yes. He was in Bob's regiment during the war."

"I see," said Alan quietly. "So that's how you knew the truth and now that the Divisional Surgeon has spotted that it's murder, of course he will have to tell the police. It can't be hidden any more."

"No."

Betty shook her head. Again there was a pause; a long pause this time. Alan stared at his desk wondering what he could do. All the time he felt that the girl's eyes were upon him, trying to bore into his head, trying to divine his thoughts. He felt uncomfortable. Now

he was beginning to see that there was only one course which duty could possibly take—one course which was conceivable to an honest person. Hackness would have to be sent for; Hackness would have to be given all the facts.

"Oh, it's all my fault." It was a desperate cry this, which came to him from the other side of the desk. "If only I'd explained to Jarvis. It's my pride, my vanity that's brought this horror on two men. Oh, you won't let Bob be hanged, will you? You won't let it come to that?"

Alan Fergusson looked up at her. Her eyes were shining with tears which she was striving hard not to shed. Two bright patches glowed in her cheeks; her lips were trembling in a very uncertain way. Deep lines under her eyes, lines which proclaimed more than all else her terrible exhaustion and fatigue, only enhanced their brilliance and Alan stared at her a moment, feeling annoyed and unhappy that he was unable to respond to the appeal.

"How can I prevent it?" he said quietly.

The girl leant forward. She spoke very earnestly.

"I'm not asking you," she said, "to divert the course of justice . . . not real justice. Bob will die in any case. It will be a life for a life, but if you don't operate he'll die unconscious, knowing nothing, die mercifully. Oh, you won't operate, will you? You won't drag him back to life to be . . . to be . . ."

She suddenly covered her face with her hands

and leant forward, unable to control herself any longer, but, in spite of this vision of weeping beauty before him, Alan took a stern hold of himself, and when he spoke his voice was hard, his manner professional.

"I'm sorry, Miss Adams, but that is no affair of mine."

Very slowly, very quietly, the girl uncovered her face and looked up at him. He could see the tears glistening on her cheeks; he could see her anguish of mind clearly in her eyes.

"You mean?" Her voice was husky, very low. "You mean . . . you will operate?"

"It's my professional duty to do my best for my patient, nothing else concerns me."

"But it's cruel! It's inhuman!"

"It's my duty." Alan Fergusson spoke very sternly. "As a doctor I have no alternative. I must do as I think best for my patient's physical health."

"You *can't* mean it. I don't believe you mean it. How can you do it knowing that he's coming back to life to be tried for murder?"

"He might be acquitted!"

Betty Adams shook her head.

"No hope of that. Benson saw him go into the house and it was his pistol they found. Do you think I'd want you to let him die if there was any hope? But to die quietly—unconscious of the horror—mercifully—not in that ghastly way, oh, you won't—you won't compel him to face that?"

Alan Fergusson sighed. Somehow this girl

must be convinced. The best he could do for her was to treat this interview as entirely private and not to reveal one word, unless it was found out by the authorities and he was called upon to speak on oath. In this case, of course, everything must come to light, but until then there was no reason why he should not remain silent and the facts be hidden.

"It has nothing to do with me," he said quietly. "I must do what is best."

Suddenly realizing the import of his words he changed the sentence.

"I mean, do what professional duty compels me to do. Don't you see that if one doctor took upon himself to judge in a case like this—to put aside all the rules of the profession—why, any amount of horror might creep in." He was speaking gently now, trying to persuade her. "In our profession we have the power of life and death in many cases, and it's essential that we abide by the strictest rules in exercising those powers."

"You mean . . . I've failed?"

The girl's voice was so toneless, so hopeless, that Alan looked up startled. He feared that the failure of her great effort for her brother might have made her physically ill; might have taken more out of her than she was able to give. But as he watched, she rose to her feet and walked slowly towards the door. There, however, she stood for a moment with her back to him, and then, turning, looked at him, her face set and white.

"Isn't there anything that I can say?"

But Alan Fergusson knew that he must not let his natural sympathy sway him at that moment. He had won a hard-earned victory and any false step now, just at its culmination, might turn it into defeat. He raised one hand and, interrupting her, spoke sternly:

"I'm sorry, Miss Adams."

"You mean . . . you will try to save him?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"*Why!*" Alan Fergusson looked at her. "My dear young lady, I can't make it plainer. I haven't minced words."

"Please tell me—why?"

She spoke imperiously, and Alan could not help admiring the picture she made standing there at the door, defiant even in defeat.

"Because . . . because . . . oh, God! because I'm a surgeon, because this is a hospital, because . . . oh, why does one always try to save people's lives?"

"Yes," said the girl earnestly. "Why does one always try to save people's lives?"

Alan Fergusson looked at her curiously. He felt that this thing was going beyond him, that he was being led away again, away from his victory. He spoke rather pompously.

"That there may be restored to them that greatest of all God's gifts—good health."

"Even if that boon is unwanted?"

Enough of this. Alan hardened his heart, rose to his feet and moved over to the door,

passing the girl with averted eyes. He opened it and held it for her. The invitation to leave was obvious—but she moved not one step. Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, but I must ask you . . ."

But the girl broke in upon his speech.

"You *shall* listen to me," she spoke insistently. "You said a moment ago that you and other doctors save people from death even against their will so that they shall be restored to health and life, but are you doing all that in this case?"

"Of course."

"*You—are—not!*"

"Eh? Well, what am I doing?"

Very deliberately the girl played her last card.

"You are patching him up for the gallows!"

"My dear young lady . . ."

"Just as those poor maimed horses in Spain are patched up so that the bulls can have another go at them, you are patching up my brother to give the executioner another job."

She paused, but only for a moment, only to let the full import of her words sink into his brain.

"Tell me . . . is it fair? Is it just? Is it in accordance with the wonderful ideals which civilization is supposed to have given to this world we live in? Would you . . . would you feel the same if he were *your* brother?"

Alan Fergusson stood quite still, his head bowed under the storm of her abuse, but suddenly he drew himself up to his full height.

"I'm afraid, Miss Adams," he said quietly, "that I must ask you to leave. I've an operation which I must perform . . . at once."

For a moment the girl stared at him, stared at him as if unwilling to believe she had really failed. Then, abruptly, she almost ran from the room. Very quietly Fergusson closed the door behind her.

10

What the devil shall I do? I know what I ought to do, of course, but . . .

Why should there be any 'but'? Is it because of that girl's figure, of her expression, of her face? I think I can honestly tell myself that it isn't, at least not in that way. Damned attractive: she'd make a good seducer for some poor young man, if one can use the word that way. Pretty—much too pretty. Adorable in her very sincere agony of mind—hey! stop this, my lad, or anything you may say won't sound very convincing.

Yes, but what the devil shall I do? If I do operate, I shall succeed: conceited, aren't you? And if I succeed he'll take his trial. And if he takes his trial he'll be convicted. I wonder if the rope makes much of a mark on the neck? Must do.

But if I don't, what happens? Nothing comes out. Jarvis Webb's name is not dragged

through the mud; no one, except the police, need know. The police know anyway, or will do very shortly: that can't be helped. And *her* name is kept out: there's nothing they can have her for, except perhaps stupidity, which is not a penal offence as far as I know. God! What shall I do?

They're both dead anyway: this other poor unconscious Bob upstairs will be, even if I cure him, in a few weeks. It's true what she said, patching him up for the gallows. No more harm can be done than already has been done.

I'm throwing away a great chance: my reputation is growing: it doesn't want very much more to confirm my position. It's a temptation.

What is? To operate or not to operate? She was amazingly attractive, but that doesn't come in, of course. Of course not. But Jarvis Webb exposed as a . . . a what? Murderer? Bad for the profession. Desperate for his family. And then *her* name needn't be dragged through the courts.

What the devil shall I do?

II

"Hullo? Give me the theatre, please."

A pause.

"Hullo? That you, Billy? Cancel the operation, old man. What? No, I'm not going to operate. What?"—testily—"*I am not going to operate:* that's all that concerns you.

Come along down, Billy: I want to talk to you."

The door, which had opened an inch or two only, unobserved by the worried man sitting at the desk within the room, closed again very silently.

Betty Adams left the building hurriedly, but she was giving the lie direct to her tear-stained face.

There was a smile playing about her lips, and a dimple in her cheek.

Part Three

Part Three

I

THE months roll by. Ninety-two days of June, July and August, and autumn tints come and then go to leave bare trees, bleak countryside, and sometimes the white carpet of cold winter. Warm, cheerful fires fill hitherto empty grates, very necessary in the short evenings.

Just as the green gives place to reddish brown, and the stems of the leaves, battered by wind and sleet, snap suddenly to help in this disrobing of the countryside, so does nature take its inevitable toll of the human mind, healing old sores, bursting out fresh ones to take their place and exacting the full penalty of wear and tear. Old memories become more faint to make way for new impressions, disturbing influences lose their power before the continual onslaught of man and facts upon the brain. The hurricane of living is battering the stem of life.

Small wonder then that the human mind, a great but puny thing, forgets old worries and remembers only new.

Until the reminder comes. Very faintly at first, perhaps, like the tiny spring leaves slowly making their appearance on the branches of the

trees, or abruptly, suddenly, as in the overnight appearance of some exotic flower . . . or toadstool. For not all memories are pleasant.

2

When winter calls "South" to the swallows it sounds the bugle call "Retreat" to thousands of English people, bidding them pack their trunks and fly to that Mecca of all winter sports lovers . . . Switzerland. And, of late years, the name of this country has become synonymous with another, in the minds of all comfort-seeking Britishers . . . the name Délicieux.

Situated in the depths of a valley, surrounded on three sides by snow-capped peaks, on the fourth by an ice-covered lake, the hotel smiles a welcome on you as you enter within its portals. An atmosphere of light-hearted happiness impels your gaiety; luxury and magnificence delight your soul. The palm-enclustered lounge is forever occupied by chattering cliques of fortunate visitors; fortunate in possessing the means to address their note-paper Délicieux—for like all good things, the hotel exacts good toll—fortunate in being of those travelled few who, after sampling the dubious delights of rival hostelries, have stumbled upon Perfection itself.

If you are a newcomer here let your arrival be at night and, if possible, chime in with a

sudden storm. The ivory lacquered lake will be hidden from your eyes in a veil of obscurity; the mountains will loom vaguely at you out of the mist, assuming impalpable, nightmare shapes, menacing, resentful. A shiver of fear makes you rejoice at sight of the hotel, whence gay strains of music hurl defiance at the towering peaks. You descend from the sleigh and walk hastily up the steps, through the doors . . . and unreality takes you by the hand.

For here the strangeness is by contrast. Outside the snow continues to fall, lazily thickening the ashen carpet; the wind howls an eerie concert, while here . . . your feet sink into the depths of Turkish rugs; your eyes are gladdened with the splendour of a palatial lounge; enormous palms cast inviting shadows near great golden pillars which reach to the blue immensity of ceiling. Through a half open door you catch a glimpse of the ballroom whence come those strains of music. Whirling couples are testing the Délicieux's proud boast that its ballroom is the finest in the land.

Alphonse—the inevitable, unequalled, infallible Alphonse—whose name is spoken in accents of awe and reverence in a thousand English homes, hastens to greet you. He beams; he gesticulates; he chatters in a medley of broken English and rapid French . . . and leads you to the best dinner it has been your fortune to consume for many a day.

It is all unreal that night, the contrast from the stormy, menacing outside is still too sudden.

But the next morning when you wake a brilliant sun will hasten your rising, while a glimpse from the window retards your dressing. The snow-clad mountains still stare solemnly from their seemingly impenetrable heights at the tiny hotel in the valley, but now their stare is no longer sinister. A kindly, if slightly sardonic curiosity seems to have replaced it, to invite your interest: you catch sight of the lake, gleaming opalescent in the early sun. You descend at length to the superb dining-room and sip your coffee, your face turned searchingly towards the everlasting hills whose secrets you now no longer fear to probe.

And then . . . beware. Beware, young lady, of the quickening of the blood racing through your veins, the quickening which is caused by the health which Old Man Frost forces upon you, the quickening which is caused by the beauty of the scenery. Beware, young man, of the sparkle on the snow and in the eyes of your fair companion. Beware, both of you: all that is white is not pure: the glare of Switzerland can blind every way as effectually as the moonlight by the Pyramids.

For every pound of pleasure there is a hundredweight of snow. And snow is but the sister to cold sleet.

3

The swing doors of the Délicieux open and

allow a current of cold air and a veritable babble of happy voices to enter. Through these doors many holiday-makers of both sexes burst into the hotel and break up into laughing groups in the lounge, striving to allay the most violent pangs of hunger induced by the keen air and to while away the few minutes which must elapse before the luncheon hour.

One group of three approached a small table in the corner of the room, a laughing group composed of two men and a girl.

She was very beautiful, this girl. Tall and slim with tiny golden curls peeping coyly from beneath her blue wool tam-o'-shanter. A blue jersey and muffler, with pleated dark blue skirt, all patterned fantastically in yellow and white, and thick-laced boots coming up to her knees, completed her attire which she wore with elegance and charm. Her face, brown and rosy, seemed to sparkle with health and joy ; her eyes, extraordinary, fascinating eyes of greyish-brown, gleamed merrily as she chatted. Two tiny dimples jumped to life in her cheeks as she smiled, a bewildering smile which—like a magic wand—lent enchantment to her face, making it bewitching and irresistible. Many curious, admiring glances were cast in her direction, of all of which, however, she seemed to be quite unaware.

Her attention was fixed on one of her companions, a short, rather chubby, little man, on whose cheerful face a smile of good humour seemed perpetually to linger. Billy Blyth,

contented as ever, gazed in undisguised admiration at the girl, plying her with bare-faced, extravagant compliments. His manner was entirely naïve and droll, and amused her intensely; not so his other companion, however. This last, a tall, thin, slightly-built man, with sharply pointed features and skin against whose sallow tint the sun had waged a losing battle, stared sullenly at Blyth, darting stealthy uneasy glances at the girl as she made light-hearted retorts. No two men could have formed greater contrast than these; the one, cheerful and bantering; the other, gloomy, sombre, with an air of profound discontent. Even on holiday James Hackness must nurse a grievance.

At last the girl became conscious of these uneasy, furtive glances; a constraint destroyed her mirth and she turned quickly to Hackness.

"Well, I'd better be going up to change."

She half rose from the chair, but both men were eager to dissuade her.

"Oh, don't go yet. What's the hurry?" Hackness spoke disappointedly.

"Come for a walk round the lake," urged Blyth.

"Come up to that jolly little wood," broke in Hackness quickly.

But the girl shook her head, smilingly.

"I don't feel like going out again—and it's going to snow—look!"

She waved one hand towards the window. Only a little while before the sun had been shining fitfully out of a sky whose blue serenity

would have proved a fitting rival to the Mediterranean itself, but now . . . a sudden shadow crept swiftly over the horizon, dark clouds chased each other across the sky . . . a chill wind heralded the approach of snow. Hackness cast a hasty glance out of the window, then turned once more to the girl.

"Then let's just sit here and talk."

Blyth nodded his head in agreement and offering his cigarette case first to the girl, then to Hackness, murmured: "Let's!"

Hackness scowled at him in annoyance.

"Not you, Billy. You're not wanted."

There was a short pause, then Blyth spoke quickly.

"My dear Hacker, can't you see that it's *you* are not wanted?"

"Why not?"

The question was sharp and threatening, but Blyth replied lightly:

"Well—it's never the policeman who's 'wanted,' is it?"

Hackness scowled. There was an ugly light in his eyes. He spoke in the same sharp, menacing tone.

"I think that's in very bad taste, Blyth."

But the girl interposed quickly.

"He can't help it, Mr. Hackness. It's envy. He'd give his eyes to be a sleuth; wouldn't you, Billy?"

Blyth grinned.

"I'd give my skates for the chance to run in a real live murderer."

Blyth spoke gaily and smiled at Hackness. The two men stared at each other for a second, a second during which each failed to notice the effect of Blyth's words on the girl. She started slightly and a dull flush overspread her features; then as suddenly as it had come the colour went from her face, leaving it white and rather haggard. She gripped her hands nervously and sat staring before her; her lips pressed together tightly as though in fear.

"Well, you wouldn't get the chance at Scotland Yard. The only chance I ever had they took from me."

Hackness spoke in a grumbling voice, a voice which was habitual.

"How was that, Hacker?"

"My senior chose that day to return from Paris, and took it out of my hands. When I got to the place——"

"The scene of the cerrime?"

Hackness nodded.

"Yes. I found him there before me, and was told to take myself off again."

"Why worry?" Blyth spoke soothingly. "You're doing very well out of jewel thieves."

But the Inspector frowned.

"There are so few really famous jewels stolen——"

Blyth grinned.

"What will you give me if I have a try at the Koh-i-noor for you?"

Hackness smiled grimly.

"Seven years!"

Blyth laughed a little hilariously at this unexpected sally from the surly Inspector, when suddenly a respectful voice at his side made him look up in surprise. One of the waiters stood beside him holding a tray on which reposed a telegram.

"*Un petit bleu, M'sieu.*"

Blyth seized it and, after a glance at the others for permission, slit open the envelope. He scanned the contents hurriedly, then a beaming smile lit up his face.

"By Jove!" He spoke delightedly. "This is from old Alan. He'll be here this morning."

He glanced quickly at his watch:

"I've just time to go to the station and meet the old beggar."

The girl, who by now had regained her composure, asked pleasantly:

"A friend of yours arriving, Billy?"

Blyth smiled and jumped to his feet.

"My greatest pal! I was afraid he'd never be able to manage it, but he has. Will you excuse me if I rush off at once? I've only just time."

He turned to the girl apologetically.

"But of course."

Blyth turned to go, then suddenly a thought seemed to strike him. He swung round and spoke eagerly.

"And, I say—won't you lunch at our table? Do—you too, Hacker, of course?"

He glanced at the Inspector, who nodded assent, then turned once more to the girl.

"I want most awfully to introduce old Alan to you. You see, I—I've told him a devil of—I mean an awful lot about you."

The girl smiled mischievously.

"Have you? And why haven't you told me a devil—I mean, an awful lot about him?"

Blyth grinned.

"Been too busy talking about myself."

He paused a moment, and then added prettily:

"And thinking about you, you know."

The girl smiled again. There was something very charming and boyish about Blyth; a certain artlessness which few could resist.

"That was very prettily said," she spoke gaily, "and as a reward—I'll lunch with you and your friend."

"Hooray," Blyth suddenly hailed a passing waiter and cried excitedly. "Tell the chef we want an extra special *déjeuner* to-day—ross bif, old chap—and radish au cheval, and—what the devil's the French for a spot of hops?"

He turned anxiously to the others.

"*Bière*," cried Betty, laughingly.

Blyth's face lit up.

"Of course," he cried quickly, "I might have known it was a universal word."

The girl laughed, and watched him as he darted swiftly from the room, almost dancing between the tables on his way to the door. She turned to Hackness who had been watching her intently.

"What a delightful boy he is," she said lightly. "He'll never grow up."

Hackness nodded.

"He was always like that at school."

His companion glanced at him in surprise.

"Were you schoolfellows?"

Again he nodded.

"Yes. We're all old Standonians, Blyth and myself and this fellow who's coming to-day."

"Oh! I didn't know." The girl spoke slowly, then suddenly added: "Shan't I be in the way?"

"You?" Hackness spoke incredulously. There was a curious glint in his eyes. He bent over the girl: "You know you could never be that—where I'm concerned."

He paused and an ugly frown disfigured his face.

"Though I'm not sure you won't be the cause of my quarrelling with Blyth before long."

His voice was low and bitter, and the girl caught her breath and stared at him in dismay. There was something terribly vital in everything he said, something which to her annoyance always disturbed her.

"You'd quarrel with an old friend about me? No, no, you mustn't do that. It distresses me to think of such a thing."

She shivered and muttered softly:

"There have been too many quarrels through my fault already."

Hackness stared at her gloomily. His manner was habitually sombre and dreary, and now he took no pains to hide it.

"I don't wonder at that." He spoke dismally,

"Women who are as beautiful as you are made to breed dissension among men."

Again the girl started and a surprised look gleamed in her eyes.

"Oh, don't—please, don't! You don't know how it grieves me to hear you talk like that. No men shall quarrel about me—on that I'm determined." She stared before her blindly for a moment, then added very slowly: "I'd rather—disappear altogether."

"You don't mean—" Hackness burst out in shocked tones, then suddenly recovered himself. "But, of course not—you mean you'd leave here and go somewhere else."

He stared at her gloomily for a few moments:

"You must have friends in heaps of places—friends you know better than you do—us."

The girl glanced at him quickly. There was something strange, something rather unbalanced in her manner and when she spoke her voice was unsteady.

"I have no old friends—now!"

The last word was so low that he could hardly catch it. He gave her a searching look, but made no comment as to the strangeness of her tone. Instead he took her hand and spoke cheerfully.

"All the better! I don't want you to have old friends. I want to be your only friend. I want to be everything to you—as you are to me."

His voice was low and insistent and he stared intently at the girl, his eyes gleaming brightly.

But she tried nervously to withdraw her hand—which he still held fast—and spoke quickly:

"Please don't talk like that, Mr. Hackness. It distresses me."

"But why?" He stared at her unswervingly. "When two people love, oughtn't they to be all in all to one another?"

Again the girl tried to withdraw her hand, but he refused to let it go. A look of anger came over her face, two bright spots of red glared in her cheeks, and she spoke sharply:

"Aren't you rather assuming things?"

But Hackness refused to be discouraged. He held her hand firmly and stared at her musingly.

"You mean that you don't love me yet? Perhaps not. But I'd soon make you."

An incredulous look came into the girl's eyes.

"I don't think I'm easily made to do things."

Hackness smiled. He gazed at her admiringly. Her anger only increased her charm in his eyes.

"You couldn't help it this time," he said softly. "You'd have to love me when you realized how deeply I love you. Do you know, since I've met you, I've thought of nothing else. I eat you—I dream you—you haunt my days——"

The words came out like the bursting of a dam. He spoke with deep feeling, underneath which, with a shiver of fear and alarm, the girl sensed an almost maniacal will.

She stopped him firmly.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was cold. "I did

not at all wish to—to raise that kind of feeling, Mr. Hackness. Will you please let go of my hand? You hurt me!"

She managed to get it free and made as though to rise, but Hackness leant over her and muttered quickly:

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." He glanced around the room, realized that they were the only occupants of the lounge, and bent over her again. "And yet——" His voice was low and cruel. "And yet I can imagine a savage pleasure in hurting you—but only that I might heal the wounds after with my love."

The girl shrank away and rose quickly.

"Mr. Hackness—please—I'm afraid I cannot listen to this any longer."

He jumped up quickly and tried to seize her hands.

"I've been too quick? I've frightened you? But you'll get used to me—you'll learn to love me——"

The girl had had enough. Whatever sympathy and pity she might have felt for him before he had killed by his insistence. She spoke sharply, her voice icy:

"I do not think so. And now, if you don't mind, I'll go up and change for lunch."

She tried to pass him, but he barred the way.

"I shan't let you go till you've told me, at least, that you'll wait and give yourself a chance to know me better. You won't listen to that fool Blyth, will you?"

He seemed to have lost all control, and she stared at him in contempt.

"Really, Mr. Hackness, I am not in the least likely to listen to anyone, if by that you mean fall in love with them. I——" Her voice broke for a second, but she went on bravely, "I—have done with all that sort of thing."

The Inspector stared at her in astonishment; when he spoke his tone was rough:

"You say that at your age? And with that lovely face? It's nonsense. It only means that you are waiting for the man to come along who can show you what love really is—who can give you real love—passionate love——" As he spoke he kept getting closer and closer to her, but with each step the girl backed away as far as she was able. She could go no further, now, however; she was up against the wall and she stared round her wildly seeking escape. "I swear I won't let you go till——"

But the girl had caught sight of a waiter over Hackness's shoulder. She called out sharply, so sharply that her voice impelled instant attention.

"*Garçon.*"

The man sized up the situation at a glance and approached rapidly.

"If monsieur will kindly move," he said politely, but in a firm, unyielding tone, "I vill shoost zet ze table in ordaire——"

Hackness, unable to protest too obviously, was compelled to move aside and on the instant

the girl darted past him and up the stairs.

"One minute——"

Hackness glared at the waiter who, in a very skilful manner, was using the table to cut off his retreat, and called again:

"Here—one minute."

But the girl had had enough.

"I must go and dress——" she cried over her shoulder and disappeared from sight.

The infuriated Inspector strove to follow her, realized that pursuit was useless, and turned to curse the waiter violently for his intrusion, but he was too late. A noise at the door made him pause and look up in annoyance. Billy Blyth had entered the room, followed by a tall, rather pallid man of distinguished appearance. They were both talking eagerly and neither appeared to notice anything strange in the attitude or manner of Hackness who, quickly recovering himself, turned his back on the imperturbable waiter, forced a smile to his lips and walked slowly forward to welcome them.

"Hullo, Hacker," chirped Blyth cheerily, "Here he is—the old blighter!"

Hackness felt Alan Fergusson's long clever fingers gripping his own. For a long moment the two men stared silently at each other. It was six months since last they had met; six months during which the surgeon seemed to have aged a year, the Inspector not a day.

"Well—how are you, Hacker?" said Fergusson pleasantly.

Hackness smiled.

"Oh, quite all right, thanks. But you don't look any too fit, Fergusson."

Blyth glanced affectionately at his friend and broke in quickly.

"He's been working too hard. Lord, the cases that man gets! I believe he hypnotizes his patients—they're devoted to him."

Hackness laughed.

"Had any more Venuses given you, Fergusson?"

"Hottentot Venuses don't grow on every bush, Hacker," replied Alan smilingly.

"A blessed good thing for horticulture," retorted the Inspector. "An uglier monstrosity than that creature I never saw."

Fergusson smiled somewhat ruefully. Adverse criticism of his most precious possession had the power of annoying him intensely.

"Yet she's worth considerably more than her weight in gold," he hastened to point out. "Which is more than can be said of most women!"

Alan spoke lightly enough, but on the instant a deep frown overshadowed the Inspector's face and his lips twitched nervously.

"I believe you," he muttered gloomily. "Capricious creatures, even the best of them."

Fergusson glanced curiously at the other.

"You speak feelingly," he retorted.

"'Course he does," broke in Blyth gaily. "Aren't we both—he and I—tied to the chariot wheels of the loveliest incarnation of Helen of Troy you ever saw?"

Fergusson swung round quickly. A rather astonished look had crept into his eyes.

"Is Hacker a victim, too?" he asked in surprise.

Hackness glanced suspiciously from one to the other. All the geniality had fled from his face; he was frowning sullenly, a dull gleam of jealousy distorting his eyes. When he spoke his voice was thick and ugly.

"Blyth has told you he has fallen for the girl, then?"

The question, and more particularly the tone in which it was put, brought an atmosphere of constraint into the room. There was silence for a moment or two; a silence oppressive with the threat of a scene. Fergusson broke the tension skilfully; his manner was light and unemotional.

"No need to tell me," he said laughingly. "He wrote pages and pages about her. That's why I came along—just to see what sort of an Ariadne had spun her spider's web about the boy. Baby-snatching, that's what I call it."

He laid his hand affectionately on Blyth's shoulder and, unseen by Hackness, nodded to him meaningly. The other was quick to seize his cue.

"Wait till you see her, Alan," he cried quickly. "What'll you bet that you won't be the third?"

"Third what?" Alan's voice was cynical. He was feeling tired, and disliked intensely being suddenly called upon to act as a buffer

against the Inspector's apparently unbridled emotions.

Hackness burst in savagely:

"Victim to her charms, he means."

But Blyth refused to be dramatic.

"Hopeless worshipper of her perfections," he retorted brightly. "That's the proper way to put it, isn't it? Of course, I haven't an atom of chance. I know that. I'm not—simply not in the running."

Blyth's purposeful disclaimer was at once effective. The other's face lit up triumphantly.

"Glad you recognize the fact, Billy," he said pointedly.

Fergusson glanced at him sharply.

"You seem pretty serious about it, Hacker."

There was an evil, almost maniacal look on the Inspector's face as he answered. His voice was low and menacing.

"I'll damned well throttle anyone who comes between me and her!"

Again there was an awkward, unhappy pause.

"Gosh!" said Alan to himself. "That's a nice way for a Scotland Yard man to talk!" he laughed.

"Hacker's after a *cause célèbre*, you know, Alan," burst in Blyth jokingly, "and looks like providing the materials for one himself if he doesn't get his way with the lady." His tone changed, and he added soberly: "Though, you know, I don't think it's quite the thing for us to be talking of her like this."

Fergusson gave him a grateful look.

"Neither do I, Billy," he cried quickly.

"You haven't seen her," growled Hackness, the sullen frown deepening on his face.

"He'll see her at lunch," said Blyth evenly, and turning to Fergusson went on quickly. "She's sitting at our table, Alan."

"Good."

Alan spoke curtly, using the monosyllable to close the door on a subject which had brought an atmosphere of such tense unpleasantness into the room. It was in a brisk, totally different tone that he spoke now, turning to Hackness as though he were only beginning the conversation.

"Had much luck at the Yard lately, Hacker?"

Hackness, a little surprised by the changed tone, glanced at Fergusson quickly. He seemed to pull himself together on the instant and when he spoke, although his tones were still sulky and grudging, the frown had vanished from his face and he looked a little more genial.

"Only jewel cases," he answered slowly.

"Well—that's luck, isn't it?" Fergusson spoke lightly.

"I tell you," interrupted Blyth, "old Hacker's just thirsting for a murder, Alan. It seems he never gets a chance. His superiors snatch them from him."

"Naturally," laughed Fergusson. "What else are superiors for?"

He turned to Hackness and spoke more seriously:

"But that's bad luck, Hacker. I thought nowadays that murderers were as plentiful as blackberries."

Hackness shook his head. There was a keen, interested look in his eyes now. He loved to talk of his profession.

"Can't always catch them," he answered briskly. "The only case that ever came my way——"

"Which his superior snatched——" broke in the irrepressible Blyth.

"Yes," agreed Hackness, "but it didn't do him much good, for it never came to anything. The suspected man died."

"But isn't that what you ghouls want?" queried Fergusson sardonically.

Hackness smiled.

"He didn't die that way—he died in your hospital," he said quickly.

"Be careful, Alan," Blyth urged mockingly, "anything you say may be used in evidence——"

"Don't rot, Billy," interrupted Hackness, a frown of displeasure returning to his face. He turned to Fergusson and continued quickly: "You remember the case, Fergusson? I was called in while I was with you—over the 'phone——"

Fergusson's lips tightened, but he made no reply.

"And then your superior hoofed you out again?" asked Blyth quietly.

"He ran into the Yard just after they'd 'phoned me and got to Wimpole Street before

I did." Hackness's tone was resentful. "So, when I arrived I was sent away again. However, as I say, he didn't gain much by it, for the case came to nothing."

He turned again to Fergusson.

"You must remember—it was about the murder of your friend, Mr. Webb."

For an instant a strange look of fear and repulsion leapt to life in Fergusson's eyes, but for an instant only. The next it was gone and a stern, rather forbidding expression crept over his face. But swift as had been its transit it did not escape the eagle eyes of Hackness. He stared curiously at Fergusson and continued to eye him covertly throughout the conversation.

"We haven't forgotten," replied Fergusson grimly.

"I should think not," agreed Blyth, his voice full of deep feeling. "Poor old Webb!"

There was silence for a moment, then Hackness spoke briskly:

"Well, they traced the man who did it all right. He had been seen coming from the house the night before by the constable on duty, who brought him along to you because he had a fit."

Fergusson nodded. His face was rather set, but perfectly calm, and when he spoke his voice was quite unemotional and even.

"I remember. He died the next day—soon after you called, in fact."

"Yes." There was a pompous note in the Inspector's voice. "Seems he shot Webb

because his wife had died when Webb was operating."

"Yes," said Fergusson dryly. "*I* told you about the operation."

Hackness ignored this.

"But there wouldn't have been much to the case even if he'd lived," he continued.

Fergusson glanced at him in surprise.

"Too obvious, you mean?" he asked curtly.

"No kudos for you sleuths at Scotland Yard, eh, what?" broke in Blyth sardonically.

Hackness shook his head.

"Not an atom. All the sympathy would have been with the prisoner. No jury would have convicted him of murder in the circumstances."

Fergusson had been standing gazing out of the window deep in thought, but at these words he swung round and stared at Hackness incredulously. There was an unnatural, high pitched note in his voice as he cried out sharply:

"What?—why not?"

Hackness smiled grimly. He was thoroughly enjoying himself now. There was a cruel, almost feline trait in his character which made him appreciate to the full a situation from which another man would have fled in loathing.

"Why—didn't you know"—he paused a moment and glanced gleefully at the two men before him—"your friend Webb was drunk when he operated on the man's wife? Extenuating circumstances of a kind to appeal enormously to any jury."

Fergusson stared unbelievingly at Hackness, his face, from which every vestige of colour had flown, stunned and frigid. He moistened his lips twice; then, in a hard, unsteady voice, stammered painfully:

"You mean—Webb's murderer wouldn't have been—hanged?"

Hackness, delighted beyond measure by the extraordinary interest his statement had aroused, watched Fergusson intently as he answered in dry, professional tones:

"Of course not! He'd have got off with a light sentence—two or three years at most——"

"Good God!"

Fergusson shut his eyes a moment and swayed as though he were about to fall. He clutched hold of a chair and sat down heavily, his hands gripped together, a look of utter horror on his face. Hackness eyed him curiously, an unpleasant sneer twisting his lips.

"Oh, of course," he said derisively, "as a surgeon, you side with your fellow practitioner."

Blyth glanced at him with contempt.

"We don't exactly approve of being drunk when we take up the knife, Hacker!" he put in dryly.

Hackness laughed, an ugly laugh, full of venom and spite.

"Fergusson seems quite worried at the idea that Webb's slayer would have escaped hanging," he said bitingly.

"Old Webb was a friend of ours, you know,"

burst out Blyth. "But, for God's sake, let's talk of something more cheerful! At the moment, I feel as if even the driest of Martini's wouldn't tempt my appetite."

Hackness glanced at him disdainfully.

"Your appetite doesn't need tempting. I wonder the hotel people don't charge you double."

Blyth laughed and Fergusson, who had been sitting staring in front of him as though in a trance, roused himself at the sound.

"Ah, but I'm in love," cried Blyth, ridiculously.

At this moment the three men heard rapid steps outside and into the room came hurrying a vision of red and yellow. Golden curls, freed now from the imprisoning tam-o'-shanter, in vivid contrast to a dainty silk frock of deepest red, she looked even more enchanting than before, and Blyth rushed forward eagerly to welcome her.

"Here she is!" he cried gaily. "I say, how topping you look!"

He glanced admiringly at her frock, then turning to Fergusson, who was still gazing, deep in thought, out of the window, cried:

"May I introduce Mr. Fergusson——"

But Alan's mind was too absorbed to heed the call.

"Alan——"

Blyth spoke insistently, and with a jolt Fergusson realized his surroundings. He turned slowly and glanced listlessly at the girl before

him . . . Speechless for the moment the two stood motionless gazing at each other wide-eyed, their faces incredulous. At last Fergusson's lips moved:

"Miss . . ."

But the girl was too quick for him.

"Bryant," she put in breathlessly.

Fergusson bowed and continued to stare at her fixedly, but suddenly Blyth, who had been almost as dumbfounded as the two concerned by this unexpected recognition, burst out in astonishment.

"You know one another?"

The girl smiled, a strange, uncertain smile, but her voice was quite calm and even as she replied, her eyes gazing steadily into Alan's:

"Mr. Fergusson was once very, very kind to me!"

Kind to her! For a second Alan could hardly restrain a groan. Kind to her? And he had killed her brother—killed her brother! Hackness's words kept drumming into his brain—"A light sentence—two or three years at most"—But he had let him die! And here she was smiling piteously at him, thanking him . . .

Suddenly an instinct of danger made Alan glance up quickly. Hackness was staring at him fixedly. There was something sinister, dangerous, a hint of evil menace in the look, and on the instant Fergusson was himself once more. He turned to the girl, a pleasant smile lighting up his face, and he spoke gently:

"Shall we go in to lunch—Miss . . . Bryant?"

For a second her lips quivered: then she smiled gratefully to him and, chattering gaily, led the way out of the room. Blyth, still looking somewhat puzzled, followed close on her heels, keeping up a flow of light-hearted badinage, but Hackness held back a bit. He walked slowly along, seeing nothing but the bemused expression on Fergusson's face at the moment of recognition. He was trying to remember something, something which had been worrying him subconsciously for several days. Where had he seen this girl before? Why had her face seemed so familiar? Why should there be that feeling, that hunch that . . .?

There was a baleful light in his eyes as he followed the others into the dining-room.

4

There was dead silence in the room; for the last half hour there had been no sound. The man seated on the bed, his hands gripped tightly together, his face white and set, might have been a statue carved by some artist's hand: a statue of despair. For there was a look of utter hopelessness in the man's eyes; a look which said, far more poignantly than could any words, that his world had come

crashing to pieces about him, that the ground had crumbled under his feet.

It was such a bolt out of the blue. Why, in heaven's name, had he elected to spend his holidays in the one spot on earth which harboured the two people he least desired to meet? Only yesterday, only that very morning, he had felt entirely content, entirely secure; the memory of his momentous decision on that evening six months ago, that decision so human and yet so unprofessional, had slowly receded from his mind. It was a part of his past . . . finished with; a ghost which, after the first few weeks had ceased to haunt him. But now . . . here was this girl, his co-partner in a deed which people might condone but never tolerate; here she was, more beautiful than ever, trying, poor soul, to escape her own past by using a different name, and thanking him . . . for what? For letting her brother die, for conceding to a maudlin sentiment, a cheap humanity. Had he operated then the man would be living now, in prison perhaps but . . . what was it Hackness had said—"two or three years at most."

Fergusson clenched his teeth lest the agony in his soul should escape his lips. What was he to do? What was he to do? And Hackness, dangerous, cunning, felinely clever, suspected something; of that Alan was quite certain. Also . . . he was insanely jealous of any intimacy with the girl. Alan went over in his mind this disastrous day; that ghastly

lunch, with Hackness, ever watchful and morose, waiting eagerly his chance to strike. And the hours that had followed. Not for one moment had he been alone . . . this was the first opportunity he had had to face the facts; to marshal his thoughts . . . to loosen his guard.

Suddenly Fergusson started and looked up quickly, an anxious, defensive gleam in his eyes. There had come a knock on the door, which opened instantly and Blyth, a somewhat chastened Blyth, stood hesitatingly on the threshold.

"May I come in, old man?" he asked quietly.

"Oh . . . yes, do, Billy."

Fergusson spoke jerkily, a forced smile playing uncertainly round his lips. Blyth glanced at him anxiously, but did not speak. He sauntered slowly into the room and paused a moment at the windows, over which the blinds had not yet been pulled. From here the view was really magnificent, but the artificial light within the room increased the blackness of the night and Blyth could see nothing save the vague, impalpable shapes of spectral mountains. He shivered. There was something dangerous, something uncanny in the sight, and as he turned back to the lighted room, to the silent figure on the bed, the danger seemed to stalk by his side. He gazed thoughtfully at his friend, affection gleaming deeply in his eyes, and said gently:

"Anything I can do, old chap?"

Alan, who had resumed his dreary reverie, looked up as though in surprise, then smiled:

"Er . . . yes, shut the door, Billy, like a good fellow. I want to talk to you."

His voice was brisk but a little unsteady, and Blyth was frightened by its tone. Only something very disastrous could have induced it. He hastened to the door and closed it quickly.

"Sorry. I rather thought you wanted to get something off your chest."

He seized a chair facing the bed and sat down, his fingers seeking in an outer pocket for the inevitable cigarette. Having offered the case to Fergusson, who shook his head, Blyth lit one himself and waited silently for Alan to speak.

"You guessed I was upset?"

Blyth nodded.

"Well, naturally."

"Did I show it so much, do you think?"

Fergusson's voice was dull and unemotional.

Again Blyth nodded.

"'Mps! 'Fraid so."

"You think Hackness saw?"

Blyth paused a moment. He was loth to say it, but the fact had been very obvious. He shrugged his shoulders:

"Yes."

Fergusson's face became expressionless. He spoke simply and curtly.

"Then he'll ruin me."

"Why?"

Blyth was looking uneasy and puzzled. Above all else he detested anything approaching a scene and . . scenes had only just been avoided that day. He glanced at Fergusson a little impatiently.

"Why?" Alan sounded surprised. "Can't you see he's eaten up with jealousy of anyone who approaches Miss—Bryant?"

"Betty? Think she'd look at him?"

"That's not the point." Fergusson was speaking quickly, excitedly. "He probably thinks she will, but, in any case, he doesn't mean to let any other man come near her. Don't you remember how he used to be at Standing? He couldn't bear tomatoes, but he'd always take and secrete his share rather than let any other boy have them."

Blyth grinned. This reminiscence had greatly relieved the tension.

"I know. He used to hide them in the boot locker and one rolled into his football boot and squashed all over his toe!"

A faint smile played about Fergusson's lips, but his eyes still held the blank, hopeless look they had borne ever since lunch.

"The leopard doesn't change his spots, Billy," his voice was stern. "Hacker is just what he used to be"—his tone changed and became full of affection—"and Billy Blyth is just the same good-tempered, unselfish little fellow he always was——"

"And Alan Fergusson is just the same honest-to-goodness captain of school," retorted Blyth

stoutly, "and Hacker'll have to recognize that fact."

Fergusson shook his head.

"This time the captain has put himself in the wrong, Billy—and badly in the wrong. It's up to any sneak and bully who likes, to get him—expelled."

The last word came out slowly and in a voice hardly above a whisper. For a second Blyth wondered whether his ears had deceived him, but for a second only. One glance at Alan's face denied the possibility.

"Expelled?—Alan—you don't mean——"

He broke off and stared unhappily at his friend, who went on steadily:

"I mean that if Hackness finds out certain things that he's within an ace of finding out—I'm afraid he will have it in his power to have me—chucked out of my profession."

A wave of horror swept over Blyth's face. He stared at Alan incredulously and blurted out:

"Alan! Is that true?"

Fergusson nodded. He was perfectly calm now, his voice quite steady as he replied:

"Perfectly true—and it's true, too, that he would be justified. For I've deserved it, Billy."

Blyth spoke deliberately:

"Whatever you've done—or haven't done—Alan, I know you've done it with the best of motives, and I'm with you—all the time."

A glad light leaped to life in the other's

eyes. He smiled, a rather triumphant smile despite its underlying sadness. It was something, after all, to have achieved an allegiance such as this.

"Thank you, Billy. But the time may be short, you know. We must face facts."

Blyth frowned, a puzzled frown.

"How do you mean—the time may be short?"

There was silence for a moment; then Fergusson spoke very quietly:

"Events move quickly. So do Scotland Yard officials."

"Look here, old chap, hadn't you better tell me the whole story?" Billy was very serious. "I—might be able to help—the lion and the mouse, you know——"

He stopped and glanced at Fergusson eagerly.

"Thank you, Billy," Alan spoke gravely, "but I'm afraid there's no help. You see, the facts are irrefutable."

He relapsed into silence and sat staring before him, the hopeless expression deepening on his face. Blyth, haggard and aghast, stared at his friend as though stupefied. A sudden thought occurred to him. He knit his brows, then spoke quietly:

"I don't want to pry, but has it anything to do with—the fact that you didn't operate, after all, on that chap in King's Ward?"

Fergusson looked up immediately.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I refused to operate, and so—he died."

Blyth's face brightened miraculously. Was this all?

"But hang it all," he blurted out eagerly, "he'd have died in the hands of any other doctor! The operation that might have saved him was your operation and yours alone. Your discovery—and you alone with nerve enough to do it."

But Fergusson still looked blank.

"Yes, but I didn't do it—" he pointed out dully, "in his case, I—let him die."

"If you thought it too risky," burst in Blyth impatiently, "you were justified——"

Fergusson shook his head.

"I did not think it too risky—and as facts turn out I was not justified. I learned that from Hackness to-day—for the first time."

Blyth stared at him in amazement.

"You learned it from Hackness? But—he's not a surgeon. I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Fergusson's voice was dull, unemotional. Now he might have been discussing some matter in which he was not particularly interested. "Don't you remember he said that the man would not have been—hanged, in any case?"

"Why, yes, of course, but——" Billy suddenly broke off and stared at Alan in horror. The full realization had come to him. "Good God! You mean, you let him die?"

His voice was choked, his words almost unintelligible. Fergusson remained perfectly quiet, staring before him with those unseeing

eyes, but when he spoke his tone was unsteady.

"Rather than bring him back to life to be—hanged. Yes—and now I know he would not have been hanged, after all."

The wealth of despair in his voice as he spoke the last few words appalled his listener.

"Good God!" he cried, "But—what made you do it, old fellow? I oughtn't to ask. Of course, I understand really——"

Fergusson shook his head.

"I don't think you do, Billy."

"You let him die out of compassion, of course," Blyth spoke decisively.

Again Fergusson shook his head.

"Not for him!" he said steadily.

The reply disconcerted Blyth. He stared at Alan searchingly for a moment.

"For whom, then?"

"For his sister—"

There was a pause, a long pause: then Blyth ventured:

"I didn't know he had a sister. We never saw her."

Fergusson glanced at his friend and smiled rather sardonically.

"You didn't—then."

"She came to see you?" Blyth rapped out the question immediately. He was beginning to see everything now—and his expression was very grave.

A spasm of fear contracted Alan's face. He cried out quickly, his voice vibrant with emotion.

"Hackness must not know that she came. He *must not!*"

Blyth sat as though turned to stone. He was utterly astonished, entirely confounded.

"But, Alan," he managed to gasp, "do you mean that she came to see you, and——"

The surgeon lifted his hand imperatively. "Hush!"

His keen ears had caught the sound, a very slight whisper on the carpet outside as of someone approaching softly. The light footsteps stopped at the door; there was a moment's silence and then a sudden loud rap.

Fergusson turned to Blyth.

"Hackness," he whispered. Then in a firm voice he called out. "Come in."

He had hardly uttered the words when the door was flung open, and Hackness entered the room and stood glaring at them suspiciously, like some wild beast of prey in search of a victim.

"Hullo, Blyth, you here, too?"

Blyth glanced at him casually. His voice was nonchalant and easy as he replied:

"Came in to get a light, old man."

His first cigarette had been consigned to the ash tray long since and now he proceeded to light another.

Hackness smiled. Blyth was lying, he knew he was lying, and he was determined to let Blyth know he knew.

"I saw Miss Bryant give you a box of matches just now," he remarked bitingly.

"Did you?" Blyth's tone was impudent. He held the box out to Hackness: "Would you like one?"

"You came up here to talk things over with Fergusson, of course."

Blyth looked puzzled.

"Talk what over?"

"This business of Fergusson's meeting Betty Bryant again."

The reply filled Blyth with an infinite relief. That Betty might be connected in any way with the dangerous position in which his friend was placed had not occurred to him for a moment. Alan's disclosure had driven away all thought of the strange, unexpected recognition of that morning. He stared at Hackness almost gratefully and answered lightly:

"Yes, it was odd, wasn't it? But then—we medicos meet all sorts of people."

"And in all sorts of ways," put in Hackness meaningly.

Blyth frowned with annoyance.

"If you're implying, Hacker," he cried hotly, "that one could meet Miss Bryant in any wrong way, you insult her!"

Hackness shrugged his shoulders.

"Do I?" he asked indifferently. "Not necessarily. It might not be wrong for her and yet gravely wrong—not to say dishonourable—for either of you."

A wave of anger came over Blyth.

"I really don't understand you," he burst out, but Hackness interrupted quickly.

"Fergusson understands me," he said pointedly, his eyes glaring malignly at the surgeon.

All this time Alan had sat quite quietly in his chair, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, taking no part whatsoever in the quarrel waged before him. He made no answer to Hackness's jibe, seemed indeed not to have heard it.

But Hackness had gone too far where Blyth was concerned. Criticism of himself he was willing to bear, but when it involved his friends—one of them absent, moreover, and a girl whom he greatly admired—the ordinarily good-humoured little doctor saw red. He was in imminent danger of losing all control of himself at any moment, and he now appealed to Alan passionately.

"Alan, Hacker is trying to hint that you met Miss Bryant in an underhand way. Just dot him one, will you, old man? Or shall I?"

Hackness spoke quietly, an underlying note of menace in his voice, his eyes still watching Fergusson.

"I propose, instead," he muttered, "that Fergusson tells us exactly where and how he did meet Miss Bryant."

But Billy was seething with rage.

"Shall we chuck him out, Alan?" he urged.

There was a pause; then Alan, with an effort, removed his gaze from the ceiling and turned to Blyth.

"No," his voice was low and strained, "no! That wouldn't stop his tongue."

A gleam of vicious triumph shone in the Inspector's eyes.

"So you want to stop my tongue, do you, Fergusson?" he sneered.

"Badly," retorted Alan, "when you speak of Miss Bryant in that way——"

"I don't want to discuss Miss Bryant," said Hackness slowly, his voice tense with meaning. "I was alluding to . . . Betty Adams."

The name came out like a blow, but neither of his listeners appeared at all affected. The bewilderment on Blyth's puzzled face was undoubtedly genuine, while Alan's expression was wooden, imperturbable.

"Who on earth's Betty Adams?" burst out Blyth impatiently.

Hackness smiled, his keen eyes watching Fergusson intently.

"Ask Fergusson . . . he can tell you," he said coolly.

Alan raised his eyebrows.

"That's news to me," he answered dryly.

"Betty Adams," said Hackness deliberately, his eyes never swerving for an instant from Fergusson's face, "is the real name of the lady who calls herself Betty Bryant."

There was a dead silence.

The effect on his two listeners was dramatic. Incredulity and unbounded amazement—the one real enough, the other a marvel of acting—drove all else from their faces. They stared at Hackness stonily and neither spoke.

At last the Inspector continued:

"I quite believe you didn't know her real name, Blyth," he rapped out, "but Fergusson did."

His voice was savage. Fergusson's magnificent self control had staggered him. For a moment he wondered whether indeed he was imagining things, whether that photograph at the Yard was not of some other girl, some girl whose beauty was a twin to Betty's. And yet . . . there was more here than mere resemblance. There had been a tenseness in the atmosphere when the girl and Fergusson had met; a tenseness which his sensitized mind was quick to note. And now in this room, although Fergusson apparently was staring at him with the most genuine astonishment, he felt that the man was on guard; that the brain behind those unfathomable eyes was awaiting in agonized suspense his next attack.

At last Blyth found his voice.

"I don't believe it," he burst out, hotly. "What on earth right have you to say such a thing?"

Hackness smiled.

"Professional reasons," he said slowly, "I happen to know that it's true."

His tone carried conviction; Blyth was forced to confess that.

"Did you know this all along?" he asked quickly.

Hackness shook his head.

"No. I've just found it out, but it's true

enough. I also happen to know why she's calling herself by another name."

"Why?"

The Inspector hesitated a moment; then he spoke quietly:

"I can't tell you that, but if it's any comfort to you—it's a very innocent reason."

Blyth's face cleared magically. He smiled cheerfully.

"Well, then, what on earth does it matter if she decides to call herself . . . Mrs. Grundy, even, which God forbid!—but what concern is it of ours?"

Hackness nodded.

"Quite—only you see when Fergusson met her before, she was calling herself Betty Adams—isn't that so, Alan?"

"No," Fergusson met the other's gaze steadily, "No, I've always known her as Betty Bryant—but I don't quite see what concern it is of yours anyway—or are you out to harm the girl?"

The question was put bitterly and Hackness was stung to the quick. Harm her! So far the thought had never entered his head. He clenched his fists, and when he spoke his voice was thick and uncontrolled.

"I meant and think no harm of Miss Adams. It was you I was attacking."

Fergusson smiled. For the moment he was the victor: he had pierced the other's guard.

"Then, if you mean no harm to her," he put in coldly, "perhaps you will attack me—if

you must—in some way that does not bring in her name?"

Hackness attempted a laugh—but not very successfully. There was little mirth about it.

"Of course I'm not attacking you either, Fergusson," he said awkwardly. "We're old friends, aren't we? School friends——"

"We were at the same school," Fergusson was quick to correct.

Hackness shrugged his shoulders.

"Well—I mean you no harm—not at all—besides, how could I harm you?" He laughed forcedly. "A specialist, and so popular with the ladies—even Hottentot ladies!"

Fergusson glanced at him coldly.

"Then suppose we change the conversation?" he suggested.

Hackness smiled.

"By all means . . ." He paused a moment to light a cigarette and then continued casually. "What I came in for—damn this cigarette!—ah, that's better—what I came in for was to ask you a few questions about that man Adams ——"

"What man Adams?" said Blyth innocently.

"Why, that fellow who killed Webb and died at your hospital," rapped out Hackness, swiftly. "You know."

Blyth jumped up as though he were stung.

"Was his name Adams?" he burst out incredulously.

"Didn't you know?"

Hackness looked at him curiously.

"He was Number Six, King's Ward to me," replied Blyth curtly.

Hackness turned his attention to Fergusson. There was an evil glint in his eyes.

"But Fergusson knew his name was Adams—" he said slowly—"*Robert* Adams —our Betty's brother?"

"Good God!"

Blyth could not restrain the exclamation: he stared as though fascinated at Hackness. He had just realized how great was Fergusson's danger. Hackness, like some monstrous bloodhound was on the scent; was out to destroy. With every nerve taut and on guard he watched anxiously. Fergusson was looking steadily at the Inspector, a smile of indifference playing about his lips.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I knew his name was Adams."

"You heard it from his sister when she came to the hospital?" put in Hackness quickly.

Fergusson looked at him in surprise.

"Did she come to the hospital?"

He turned to Blyth.

"I don't think anyone came when he was taken away. Just the undertaker's men, wasn't it, Billy?"

The sudden question disconcerted Blyth.

"Er—yes," he stammered. "I saw no one."

Hackness frowned.

"I wasn't referring to the day Adams' dead body was taken away," he said sharply.

Fergusson raised his eyebrows and spoke casually.

"Weren't you? Have another cigarette—" he added offering Hackness his case, "that one isn't drawing properly."

But Hackness waved it away.

"I was referring to the visit Betty—his sister—paid to you, Fergusson," he said curtly, "while her brother was still alive."

Fergusson looked bewildered.

"What visit was that?"

"The visit she paid," replied Hackness very slowly, "after she heard he had killed Webb."

"But you were with us yourself that morning, Hacker," said Fergusson, his voice puzzled and impatient. "You know she wasn't there——"

Hackness interrupted briskly.

"I wasn't with you all the morning—and it may have been the afternoon——"

"What may?" Fergusson sounded annoyed. "Really, Hacker, you are developing Sleuthitis. I should relax this Sherlock Holmes attitude a little if I were you, or you may find it—unhealthy."

The Inspector's lips curled in an ugly sneer.

"If I were a patient in your charge would you refuse to operate on me?" he said viciously.

There was a moment's pause. The tension

was too much for Blyth. Rising quickly he walked to the window and stood staring out into the night, his hands nervously playing with the blind cord. But Fergusson never moved a muscle. He stared stolidly at Hackness and said coolly, an amusing touch of longing in his voice:

"I would operate on you with pleasure."

"You wouldn't—deliberately—let me die?" snarled the other.

"My dear old fellow," Fergusson sounded horrified, "all the fun would go out of life if you died!"

There was a loud explosion of convulsed mirth from Blyth. No one could ever accuse the gloomy, saturnine Inspector of adding much to the drollery of life. The lighter touch, the joy of pleasantry were entirely lacking from his composition; a total dearth of humour was his greatest failing. And now he swung round savagely at Blyth, furious at being made the subject of a joke.

"You can laugh if you like!" he snarled bitterly. "After all, if you are both turned out of the profession you can still earn a good income on the halls as knock-about comedians ——"

But Fergusson broke in quickly. Hackness was losing all control of himself, becoming still more dangerous. It was crass folly to annoy him further. He spoke seriously now, his voice quite impartial.

"Look here, Hacker, you're really letting

this get on your brain a bit too seriously, you know."

"Letting what get on my brain," snarled the Inspector.

Fergusson shrugged his shoulders.

"Well—I suppose you'd call it love," he answered slowly, "but it needn't make you savage to old—friends."

Hackness seized the opportunity.

"We were at the same school!" he retorted spitefully.

Fergusson smiled.

"I deserved that. I'm sorry, Hacker," he went on seriously, "the fact is, I—hate the idea of quarrelling with you—or anyone—just now."

"No doubt!" The other's voice was savage. "It might prove a bit—dangerous, eh?"

"I wasn't thinking of danger," Fergusson said quietly. "You see—I'm not easily—terrorised. I meant what I said—that I don't want to be ill friends with—anyone—just now."

Hackness stared at him in amazement, entirely nonplussed by this unexpected attitude.

"You don't think you're going to get out of it that way——"

Fergusson broke in quickly:

"If you mean—am I getting out of responsibility—no. That has never been my way, Hacker. I accept full responsibility for anything I may have done or not done—but I will take dictation and interference from no one. Kindly understand that!"

He had jumped up as he spoke and now stood face to face with Hackness, his eyes proud and disdainful—a figure of dignified defiance. For a second the two men glared at each other; then, as was inevitable, the weaker was forced to yield. Hackness, unable to support the stare any longer, turned away angrily and cried:

"Very well—that's the medical man's attitude to life. 'What I do is beyond cavil. I have the right of life and death——'"

The surgeon interrupted quietly.

"The right of *death* is a thing that all men have," he said slowly, "the right to die when they choose . . ."

Something in the manner in which he spoke the words, a certain tenseness and fatality, struck a chill through Blyth's sensitive soul.

"Alan——"

But Fergusson went on swiftly. He spoke lightly now, striving to cover with purposeful animation that momentary glimpse he had given his two listeners, a glimpse into his inmost thoughts.

"And the right to life—none of us have—if we claim it to the detriment of others. Your own profession teaches you that, Hackness," he said quietly. "What about that murder case—that *cause célèbre* for which your soul hankers?"

The evil scowl on the Inspector's face deepened.

"I think perhaps I've found it, Fergusson,"

he said menacingly. "What do you say to a case in which the murderer was a surgeon?"

Fergusson stared at him steadily, his voice firm and non-committal as he answered:

"Medical men have been murderers—poisoners, as a rule, if I am not mistaken——"

"This man's crime was much simpler than that," broke in Hackness swiftly, "he merely *let* the man die when he could have saved him—what do you think of that, Mr. Surgeon?"

He was staring at Fergusson intently, eager for the slightest sign of apprehension, but Alan's face was impervious, betraying nothing.

"That it would be a very difficult case to prove, Mr. Detective," he retorted quietly.

"Not if the Crown brought forward a witness who testified to having given the motive for the crime?"

The question was truculent and full of venom.

Fergusson regarded him stonily.

"Rather an unpleasant position for that witness, wouldn't it be?" he retorted quietly. "Badgered by counsel—her inmost soul dragged out of her——"

A gleam of triumph lit up the other's eyes. Like a vulture he pounced to the attack.

"Then you admit that the witness would be a woman?"

"Obviously." Fergusson's voice was quite steady and even. "In a cowardly action of that sort, brought forward by a police officer for motives of personal ambition—obviously, the witness would be feminine.

Cowards usually fasten on women as their victims."

"You try to make me look a fool," burst out Hackness angrily, "when all the while you, yourself——"

But Fergusson broke in quickly. With a supreme effort he laughed and spoke in light, easy tones.

"While all the while I myself am—what you both swore I should be—another victim of Miss Betty's charms. She seems to turn all our heads. Let's have some whisky, Hacker, and forget our silly squabbles." He moved over to the flask which reposed on a small cabinet in the corner of the room. Suddenly he turned to Blyth. "You, Billy?"

Ever since he had caught that momentary glimpse into Fergusson's mind, Blyth's face had become set and grave. He had turned back once more to the window and remained staring out at those shadowy mountains, a sensation of dread and unreality filling his soul. Alan's meaning had been only too clear and Blyth felt stunned, oblivious to all that was happening in the room behind him; his heart sick with fear, his mind repeating over and over again the words . . . "the right to die when they choose . . . the right to die when they choose." At Alan's question he turned slowly and shook his head.

"No, thanks, old chap," he muttered uneasily. "Do you know, I—I don't think I'll stop ——"

He edged unhappily towards the door, but Fergusson's voice, cool and impersonal, stopped him.

"Take Hacker with you if you're going, old chap. I'm tired," Alan yawned elaborately, "and I want to go to sleep."

Blyth glanced quickly at Hackness.

"Coming, Hacker?" he urged.

The Inspector wavered, undecided for the moment, then he shook his head. Alan's sudden change of front had entirely nonplussed him; he felt as though he were cross-examining a sapient eel and the sensation was decidedly unpleasant.

"Not just yet," he muttered scowlingly, "I want to talk to Fergusson——"

"Oh, run along with Billy, Hacker," interrupted Alan swiftly, "there's a good fellow. We'll squabble as much as ever you like to-morrow——"

He yawned again and sank down wearily into an easy chair. Blyth cast one glance at him and then turned to Hackness.

"Come along, Hacker."

He seized the other by the arm and impelled him forcibly towards the door. For a moment Hackness wavered, then surrendered himself to the inevitable.

"All right—then—till to-morrow, Dr. Fergusson."

He flung the remark at Alan threateningly, but the surgeon took no notice. At the moment he seemed entirely occupied in stifling yawns.

Blyth threw himself into the breach gallantly.

"I say," his tone was bantering, "don't call him that or he'll have you up for libel, just as I would if you called me *Mr.*"

Alan smiled and muttered indifferently:

"Bye-bye."

A second later the still reluctant Hackness was urged firmly through the door, which clanged to behind them.

Fergusson remained motionless, an intent, listening expression on his face. He waited a second or two longer: then rising swiftly from his chair crept noiselessly across the room and, gripping the door handle suddenly, swung it open. He peered out defiantly into the blank shadows of the corridor, but no one was about. Shutting the door quietly he walked slowly, haltingly, back to his chair and sank down, his head buried in his hands—a figure of hopeless despair. But abruptly he jumped up and strode quickly to the window. The mask had slipped completely from his face. He looked haggard and very miserable.

"Chucked out . . . disgraced . . . oh, God!"

He shut his eyes and leant as though for support against the window sash. A scene flashed before his mind; a scene in which he was the principal figure. He saw the court, the sober faces of judge and counsel, heard his own faltering replies. Disgraced . . . he, Alan Fergusson, struck off the rolls!

"No."

He opened his eyes suddenly, swung round,

and darted to his suitcase which lay underneath a writing desk. For a second he searched it feverishly and then withdrew a short gleaming object. With face set and lined, lips drawn tightly together in an agony of self control, he loaded the small and vicious little pistol swiftly and stood a moment staring before him, a tortured expression in his eyes. As though in a dream he glanced round dazedly at the room in which he stood, noticing with deadly clarity each detail of its furnishing. The black and purple coverlet with its bunches of grapes; the tapestry of a chair, red and black —"Why not purple?" This lack of consistent colouring annoyed him ridiculously, seemed indeed to matter more than all else at the moment. He frowned with displeasure at a stain on the carpet where possibly some clumsy writer had upset the ink. His glance fell at last on the glass of whisky, the glass he had filled such a little while ago. His hand went out instantly; he lifted it eagerly to his lips . . . then paused. The golden spirit tilted dangerously in the glass as he held it shaking in his hand, while a thousand thoughts flitted quickly through his brain.

"No."

His lips set into a straight line. He thrust the glass back on the cabinet, cast one last swift agonized look around, then raised his right arm quickly. The cold metal touched his temple . . . but on the instant the door burst violently open, the pistol was jerked out of

his hand and fell with a dull thud on the thick carpet. Two arms, bare and shapely, pinned his own firmly to his sides, and Fergusson, incapable of speech, stared in stupefied amazement at the girl before him. For it was Betty, white-faced, horror-stricken, who had snatched him back from the very edge of death.

"Oh—no—no—no—you shan't——"

Her passionate voice was clamorous with terror. She stared at him panic-stricken; her face quivering and tense. For a long moment they stared wildly at each other, their dual selves merged in a common suffering; but for a moment only. A sudden cry, raucous and harsh with pain, destroyed the tension.

"*Betty!*"

A spasm of fear contorted her face for one moment, then dropping her arms she turned slowly round.

Hackness, his face set tragically, stood staring in tortured grief at the scene before him. He had entered the room silently and neither had heard any sound, but Betty, once again in full control, glanced at him with scorn in her eyes. She was on her mettle now, wits keen and sharp, ready to battle to the end against this danger, menacing and grim, which lurked so fearfully within that room.

"Yes, Mr. Hackness!" she said quietly.

"What are you doing here?"

His voice was thick with passionate anger.

Betty lifted her eyebrows defiantly.

"Mayn't a girl visit her fiancé in his room?"

she asked disdainfully. "I thought the modern girl was allowed to do—worse things than that."

"Her fiancé?" Hackness glared at her in stupefaction. "But—you are not engaged to Fergusson?"

Betty turned quickly to Alan and cast him an imploring look. Would he back her up, act his part in this tragedy of lies; this impromptu drama which was their one chance of escape? The pleading in her eyes was real enough and her voice trembled apprehensively as she spoke her words:

"Yes—please—if—if he'll take me back again and forgive me?"

"Forgive you? What for?"

Hackness rapped out the words savagely, his face incredulous and distraught. Betty swung round to answer, then stopped, panic-stricken. From underneath a table she had caught sight of the gleaming barrel of Alan's pistol. In another moment Hackness would see it . . . would guess everything. There was but one thing to do. Under a pretence of passionate anger she edged skilfully up to the table, a tirade of furious words streaming from her lips, her eyes glittering with excitement.

"Is it any business of yours, Mr. Hackness?" she burst out wrathfully, "but if you must have the tale—Alan and I were engaged—oh, some time ago, and then—I behaved abominably and broke it off——"

She was making agitated movements as

though in the stress of her emotion, and now suddenly kicked the pistol out of sight under the table, never ceasing for one moment the rapid flow of words.

"—but when I saw him to-day—the past came back so vividly—I felt so dreadfully to blame for that last interview with him—that I—I could not bear it."

Her voice broke sincerely enough. That last interview with Fergusson was still very vivid in her memory, poignant with suffering, and even now she could not think of it without a pang of misery. She paused a moment and then went on angrily:

"You wouldn't let me have a moment alone with him all day—you and Dr. Blyth—you were at my side all the time—and so I came up here now to—to beg him to say it's all right—and that—that we can be married—as soon—as soon as——"

She glanced pleadingly at Fergusson. Her back was turned to Hackness, and with eyes bright with meaning she signalled him for help. A long look passed between them.

Seizing his cue Fergusson slipped his arm around her and said steadily:

"It's all right, dear—everything's all right——"

"You see?" Betty swung round triumphantly to Hackness. "Now run along and tell Billy Blyth. But if you speak of it to anyone else—I'll never look at you again."

There was a look of utter blankness on the

Inspector's white face. All this while he had been staring as though benumbed, watching in tormented fascination the girl's excited movements. His brain was striving frantically to grasp this thing. Engaged to Fergusson! Betty engaged to Fergusson! With dry lips he managed to stammer:

"I'm sorry——"

"Oh, never mind being sorry," broke in Betty impatiently, "don't you see that we don't want you—now?"

She was wearing a black silk scarf which had been gradually slipping from her shoulders throughout the last few minutes. It chose this instant to flutter gently to the ground . . . a few feet from the table and the glistening firearm. Hackness leapt forward instinctively to restore it, but Betty was before him. Stooping rapidly she seized the scarf, gathered the pistol skilfully up within it and turned to Hackness.

"Thanks."

Her tone was curt.

"Good night."

Still looking bemused and incredulous Hackness moved slowly to the door.

"Good night—Fergusson," he murmured hoarsely.

"Good night."

The words came haltingly. But Hackness did not wait to hear them.

For a moment the two remained motionless, then Fergusson collapsed limply into a chair.

"Oh—my God!"

The cry, tortured and aghast, burst in agony from the haggard man. He buried his head deep in his arms and swayed restlessly from side to side. Betty leant over him gently.

"Don't—don't—oh, don't! I can't bear to see you so distressed."

Slowly the crouching figure became still. Slowly Alan lifted his head and stared as though in stupefaction at the girl.

"What have you done?" he muttered frantically.

Her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Done?" she gasped. "I hope I've scotched that snake."

"You've left him under the impression that you and I are engaged to be married."

Fergusson's voice was harsh with agitation. He stared at her in bewildered dismay.

"What else could I do?" she cried passionately. "He caught me with my arms round you——"

"I know." Alan spoke quietly now. "You could not account for your presence here in any other way, except by telling the truth——" He turned and stared at her. "You saved my life——"

But Betty broke in quickly. In a voice hardly louder than a whisper she murmured:

"You did a much greater thing than that for me—once."

There was a pause. Alan had become very still, and for a long moment he gazed at her intently. Suddenly he spoke:

"Did I? Do you know exactly what it was I did?"

There was a tender light in the girl's eyes.

"I know now," she said softly. "You gave up your chance of that operation which would have done so much to confirm your reputation, and——"

"And I went against the canons of my professional conscience"—he interrupted swiftly—"and committed what we doctors hold to be the unforgivable sin—lost the life of a patient through my own—fault."

"No! No!" she burst out passionately. "You did a great thing—the right thing——"

"Right?" His tone was bitter. "No! I put my own individual judgment before the teachings of abstract right—I let myself think I was competent to judge against the whole principles of my profession—I put feeling before duty and——" He paused for a second, then spoke firmly. "I was *wrong!*"

"No, no——"

Her voice was deep with pain, but Alan seemed not to hear her. He continued to speak in the same bitter tone as though he were talking to himself, expressing his thoughts aloud.

"I was wrong." He jumped up suddenly from the chair and commenced to pace the room. "And now I have to pay the penalty—and it is just."

"You shall not pay!" the girl cried wildly. "You did violence to your own convictions

for my sake—because of my pleading. You let yourself be swayed by humanity——"

"By what I thought was humanity," he interrupted quickly.

"And what else was it?" Her voice was passionate. "Your own personal ambitions would have been better served by performing the operation. You threw away a great chance for my sake—you ran a great risk——"

He swung round suddenly and stared at her. There was an infinite misery in the glance, an immensity of suffering which appalled the girl. She stopped on the instant and stood watching him as though turned to stone. In a voice toneless, dreadful with despair, he murmured haltingly:

"And I have realized—too late—that I threw away a life—a life I might have saved—threw it away mistakenly and for no valid reason."

He stopped and stood staring before him as though his eyes were gazing at some ghastly sight, some scene of tragedy perceptible to him alone. Betty caught her breath:

"What do you mean?"

The question seemed to waken him as from a trance. He turned and looked at her strangely.

"You don't know? Hackness has told me that because of the great extenuating circumstances your brother, if he had stood his trial, would not have got more than a sentence of three years."

For a long moment there was silence: then

a voice, a voice which the girl scarcely recognized as her own, gave expression to her thoughts :

"Oh—and it was I who urged you not to let him live——"

Fergusson glanced at her uncomprehendingly for a moment; then, as the true meaning struck him with the force of a blow, he gasped with horror.

Of course this would be her view. Why, in heaven's name, had he told her this thing? Why torture her needlessly; it would not cure his pain. What a blind selfish fool he had been: surely this girl had had enough to bear without adding to her suffering. What a callous egoist he was, thinking only of his own part in the disaster. He stared at her dumbly now. There was nothing he could say . . . he had said too much already.

It was the woman who spoke first. Her mind, quick and clear-sighted, had seized on the essential. Her voice was alive with pain.

"But—if Bob had lived—he would have had a death upon his conscience," she said brokenly. "It was more merciful to let him die!" There was a pause, then she added in a voice of fate. "*As I know!*"

On the instant the doctor in Alan submerged the man. There had been more than a hint of hysteria in her tone and he spoke calmly, firmly, intent to soothe.

"We must not think of it. *We have to live*—we must not think of it."

He paused and turned to her suddenly, a rather tragic smile hovering round his lips.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "Pretend to have a quarrel—and break it off? That's what they do in the story-books, isn't it?"

She looked at him helplessly.

"Is that the best way?"

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"Isn't it—I think it would be better if you went off on a long voyage."

"But why?" Surprise drove all else from her voice. "Why do you suggest that?" She smiled sadly. "Is it a professional prescription?"

But Alan spoke seriously, a certain urgency in his voice compelling attention.

"It would be as well, I think, if you were out of Hackness's way."

"Can't I refuse to have anything else to do with him?" she asked blankly.

"Hardly, if——"

Alan stopped remorsefully. Not content with dealing her one blow he must needs follow it up with another, and this, one which held not grief for that which was past, but the lurking horror of a future tainted with fear. His sudden pause aroused her to alertness. There was something more she did not know; something frightful which he dared not tell her.

"If what?" she cried imperatively.

"Oh, nothing." Alan strove to make his voice sound casual. "You'd better be off now—to bed——"

He edged meaningly towards the door, but the girl made no movement.

"What were you going to say?" Her voice was imperious.

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh—I only meant—Hackness is persistent——" He seized the handle of the door.

But the girl stood her ground bravely. Whatever it was that he feared to tell her she must know. There could be no peace for her otherwise.

"You meant more than that," she cried firmly. "A great deal more. Come, Mr. Fergusson, I mean to know. I think you owe me that, don't you?"

Her voice broke pathetically on the last words, and Alan was quick to reply.

"I owe you a good deal," he acknowledged.

"Then you must be frank with me," she pleaded. "You see, I know something. That dear boy, Billy Blyth, came tearing down to me and sent me here."

"Billy did?" cried Alan in surprise.

She nodded.

"He was shaking with fear of something—terrible. There was no time to ask for explanations—I came running here at once. And, as you know, I was only just in time."

Alan drew a deep breath. He was silent a moment, staring at her spellbound, a curiously tender light in his eyes. Taking her hand gently he looked searchingly into her face.

"You came like that—to my help—without explanation—because Billy asked you to?"

"But, of course," the girl sounded surprised.

For another second Alan gazed silently at her, then bowing his head kissed her hand lightly.

"You would have made a great——" he paused, then added slowly, "nurse."

Betty smiled wanly.

"And that, I know," she said quietly, "is a great compliment—from a surgeon. But you see—though I know nothing, I can guess a good deal. It was not merely the realization of what—of—of the fact that Bob—my brother—would not have——" She could not finish, could not put the ghastly fact into words, but pausing a second she continued hurriedly: "—it wasn't only *that* that drove *you* to suicide. You are not a coward."

Alan's face twitched and became even more haggard.

"Too great a coward to face public disgrace," he muttered.

Betty started violently.

"Public disgrace?"

Her eyes were wide with horror and Alan felt heartsick at the thought of what he must say. For she must know everything now; he realized that clearly. She knew and guessed too much already. To refuse to speak now would be only to torture her further; to leave her groping blindly in a maze of evil imaginings. He racked his brains to think of some way by

which he might lessen the blow and spoke slowly, his voice deliberate and very grave.

"Yes—and you are right. You ought to know, for if Hackness has his way it will mean scandal for you as well."

She recoiled a moment, her eyes dilating with terror, then pulling herself together quickly, she spoke firmly:

"Tell me, please—what is Hackness going to do?"

"He is determined to prevent me from——" Alan hesitated. This was going to be very difficult. He paused a moment: "I mean—he is—inordinately jealous where you are concerned——"

A shadow fell over the girl's face. She shivered and cried passionately:

"Oh—jealousy—they blame us women for arousing it—they don't realize how it shadows all our lives."

She shivered again and stared unseeingly before her. Alan looked at her pityingly: he guessed her thoughts. For had Jarvis Webb been a different sort of man, who knew, the whole ghastly tragedy might have been averted. Winnie, Bob, Jarvis might all be living now, the girl freed from remorse, himself from the overhanging dread of Hackness. He spoke quickly, in order to stem her thoughts.

"Well, Hackness, I think, is not quite normal where his love for you is concerned. He's a strange, reserved chap—he was always a passionately acquisitive boy. The other boys rather

kept away from him, which is why Billy and I took him up a bit, though we were always a little—on our guard with him."

The girl nodded.

"Yes," she murmured slowly. "I can understand that."

Alan continued quickly. He was trying desperately to bring an atmosphere of sanity into the room; to bring the conversation back to normal before touching at last upon that fearsome thing—the power of Hackness to destroy.

"He resented the fact that he was not as well off as the other fellows at school. His father had a shop in a little provincial town, and was ambitious for his son—then he died, and it seems the war had affected his affairs. There was no money, and Hackness joined the police force."

"That was rather fine of him," put in the girl swiftly.

Alan nodded.

"Yes. Hackness has fine qualities. He has courage and tenacity, but in some ways his tenacity—is a menace."

"Yes," said the girl gravely, "I feel that myself. I—am afraid of him."

"And now you have told him that we two are engaged—I fear you may have serious reason to be afraid."

Alan's voice was very grim and the girl glanced at him quickly.

"You don't mean you think he would—

injure me?" she said slowly, a very puzzled look in her eyes.

"Not physically. But I can quite believe that he would enjoy seeing you held up to public—ignominy—because if you were cut off from others he would think that you would be forced to turn to him. And if he could also manage to score off *me* at the same time——"

He stopped and waved his hand meaningly as though now everything was explained. But the girl's brows were knit in bewilderment. She shook her head and cried impatiently:

"I still don't understand. How can he score off you? Please speak out plainly."

Alan looked at her steadily.

"If he can get at the truth of what happened—about your brother and the operation that I—cancelled—he will have me publicly turned out of my profession. And my disgrace is bound to involve you."

"God!"—the cry was vivid with misery—"and I've done that to you!"

"That doesn't matter," Alan said quickly, "not now. The thing is—how can we keep you out of it——"

She made no answer, and, sensing that this side of the affair was not troubling her, he added pointedly:

"You see, that would be the best thing for me, too."

She glanced at him quickly.

"You mean, if he knew that I had been to the hospital that day to see you—and ask you

not to——" She stopped, again unable to say the words, and Alan broke in quickly:

"That's it. He's on the track of it already. You see, he is bound to guess about—what happened——"

"But, of course, I shall deny it," she cried defiantly.

Alan shrugged his shoulders. It would take a great deal of denying to put Hackness off the trail.

"Ye-es," he muttered doubtfully.

The girl's eyes flashed.

"I shall stick to the denial," she protested.

"Yes——"

"Well, then——?"

She stared at him questioningly and he smiled dubiously.

"Cross-examining counsel are rather—awful to face—sometimes, I mean. If one isn't used to that sort of thing—things are apt to slip out. They trap you."

He stopped, and for a moment there was silence in the room. The defiance fled from Betty's white face. She looked hopeless, despairing. Her eyes filled and she seemed on the verge of tears.

"Oh, to think—to think I've brought this on you." Her voice was passionate. "Is there a curse on me? Am I doomed to ruin the men I admire?"

Alan spoke very gently.

"Don't take it that way. You did what you thought right. You are not to blame."

She swung round on him quickly.

"Then why do you blame yourself?"

"Because I did what I knew was *not* right. I was false to a principle. But that doesn't help matters now."

"No." She shook her head and shut her eyes for a moment. "Let me think——" She opened them quickly and gazed at him in horror. "You mean—he will put me in the witness-box to give evidence against you?—to state that I called on you and begged you to —to let my brother die?"

Fergusson spoke quickly:

"Don't—don't think of it——"

"But I must." She interrupted him passionately, her voice trembling with emotion. "Do you think I can bear to have *this* happen? Your ruin on top of all the harm I've done? It's too cruel to be true—there must be a way out——"

She stopped and stared before her wildly.

"I've been beating my brains all day," said Alan sadly, "and I could only see the one way out——"

He touched the pistol which still lay in her hand, beneath the concealing folds of her scarf.

"No, no, not that way," she cried in panic, clutching the pistol firmly in her hand. "For *my* sake, not that way. You do see that, don't you? That if you die, too—through my fault I——" She paused, shut her eyes for a moment, then opening them, stared at him dully. "I couldn't go on living either."

Alan laid his hand firmly on hers and spoke very gravely:

"I will not take that way, I promise you. And if I have to leave my profession—well, there are other things to do—I can go abroad——"

But the girl broke in quickly. A gleam of hope had leapt to life in her eyes; her lips trembled with anxiety as she cried eagerly:

"No, no. That isn't to be, either. There *is* a way out. I've thought of one! Now, listen—isn't it true that by English law a wife cannot give testimony against her husband?"

Alan, who had been pacing unhappily up and down, stopped dead and stared at her.

"Yes," he murmured.

She smiled triumphantly.

"Well, then, that's the way out. Whatever Hackness may suspect, he can prove nothing against you without my testimony. And if I am your wife——"

She paused and for a long while the two looked at each other, their faces urgent with suspense. Was *this* the way out? Would this bring freedom from the law's dread tyranny? Render Hackness powerless? Themselves beyond contention? Alan's mind was alive with queries. He stared at her tensely, a deep awe and gratitude filling his soul.

"You would do that for me?" he said slowly, almost reverently. "I cannot take it from you."

"Yes, yes," cried the girl impatiently, "why

not? We are both lonely—and we are linked by this ghastly tragedy—that sets us apart from others—draws us together——"

She broke off and stared at him mutely, her eyes eager with anxiety. Alan was still staring at her intently and when he spoke his voice faltered with hesitation.

"You are young—you will forget in time—at least, the acuteness of the pain will die down——"

She interrupted swiftly:

"But we must do what we can to checkmate Hackness. If we let our engagement go on—then—if the worst comes to the worst, we could marry quickly and it would not seem a put-up job to outwit justice."

Fergusson nodded. The idea appealed to him enormously. It was so simple; so obviously right. No one would dare dispute it; no one could swear they had arranged this pact in order to thwart the law, to place themselves immune from justice. And yet . . . how could he let her do this thing? Fetter her life, adopt a bond so puissant, so irrevocable? She sensed his hesitancy, and continued swiftly:

"Of course it's true. It's the only sensible thing to do. To-morrow we'll tell Billy—the same tale, eh? That we were engaged some months ago and I broke it off—my foolishness—and now we've made it up and are going to marry shortly——"

He started involuntarily, and she added:

"We must make it seem plausible that we

shall be marrying quickly—until Hackness has given this up—until *he* has forgotten——"

Alan shook his head. There was a grim look on his face.

"He won't forget——" he murmured decisively.

Betty stamped her foot and cried loudly, impatience hardening her voice:

"Then we will both go abroad—and part there—but at least you'll keep your profession. I shan't have ruined you . . . quite!"

A thoughtful look had crept over Alan's face.

"That's a good idea. If I went to America, old Moore would help me to start a private practice there——"

Betty smiled and forcing herself to speak lightly, cheerfully, cried:

"The man who gave you the Hottentot Venus!"

Alan looked surprised and pleased.

"You remember?"

"Of course I remember—I'd always wanted to see a Hottentot Venus," she retorted lightly.

"I'll give it to you——" he cried, a note of eagerness deepening his voice.

The girl laughed. The sudden offer embarrassed her, awakened the self-consciousness which throughout their talk had lain quite dormant. The impersonal veil was torn apart and she felt shy, unconfident.

"For a wedding present?" she parried.

Alan took her hand and spoke seriously.

"As a mark of my gratitude and—admiration."

For a second the two remained silent, staring into each other's eyes; then quickly taking her hand away, Betty broke the tension:

"How formal we are!" she said lightly. She moved past him swiftly to the door then added: "Engaged couples kiss——"

A light sprang to life in his eyes. He took a step forward, but she continued at once:

"Don't forget that to-morrow—before the others—Good night, Alan——"

Her hand was on the handle of the door ready to open, and for a moment their eyes met.

"Good night—Betty——"

They were silent for a while, motionless, then the girl added pointedly:

"We'll draw Hackness's sting—never fear."

She thrust open the door and was gone before he could make a movement. Rigid, silent, the man remained staring as though transfixed at the door through which she had gone. A great emptiness seemed to fill his being; he felt alone as he had never been before. The magic of her presence brought its own reaction—the penalty of her going. Suddenly he brought his fist down on the table with a mighty bang so that the articles it bore clanged loudly in a jarring protest.

"Damn Hackness!" he cried, "or should I say 'God bless him'?"

5

The early morning sunshine weaved strange fantastic patterns into the thick lounge carpet, played coyly on the marble-topped tables, touching to deeper beauty their vivid flowers. Outside the luminous mountains of eternal snow seemed to beckon invitingly; dangerous sirens, promising rapture, bestowing peril. The lake gleamed brightly, a slab of silver lacquer, radiant, scintillating with a thousand phosphorescent spangles in the shimmering sun.

To Billy Blyth it seemed a morning straight from the pages of fable; inconceivably fresh, poignant with beauty; a morning that mocked unfeelingly his own depressing failure to respond. For he was feeling oppressed, uneasy; all his nerves were alert, were distraught, and had kept him awake long hours through the night. A heavy melancholy seemed to weigh him down. He was waiting, waiting in tense uneasiness for . . . he knew not what. The sensation annoyed him intensely. It was so rare, so utterly strange. He frowned heavily as he strode with weary steps into the lounge. It was empty and this fact seemed to increase his gloom. Flinging himself dejectedly into an easy chair, he picked up a paper and scanned it listlessly.

Five minutes passed. The silence was absolute, suddenly broken by quick, rapid steps descending the stairs. Hackness entered, his

face keen and defiant. Catching sight of Blyth, he walked straight over to him, and stood staring at him silently, the suggestion of a sneer about his lips. Blyth looked at him wearily.

"You're looking a bit down in the mouth this morning, Billy?"

Hackness spoke derisively; there was something ominous about him, and Blyth glanced at him narrowly.

"Am I?"

Hackness laughed, an ugly sound, taunting.

"Heard the news, I suppose. Love's labour lost, eh?"

Blyth turned on him angrily.

"What on earth are you talking about," he cried. "What news?"

There was a triumphant gleam in the other's eyes. He was about to hurt and gloried in the act.

"Why, that Fergusson and Betty are engaged to be married, of course," he said swiftly.

Blyth started. A hot flush mounted to his face and then slowly receded, leaving it almost pallid. He glared at Hackness.

"Engaged?"

"You didn't know?" Hackness's tone was hectoring. "And you weren't told when they were engaged before, were you?—Can't have been or you wouldn't have introduced them as strangers."

Instantly Blyth was on guard. What this move portended he could not guess. He was startled, startled to the depths of his being

by this sudden announcement; all his mind eager to concur. Whatever Alan's motive he must stand by, must add his support, co-operation.

"Oh—that—I see—no, I didn't know it was Betty he—er—was engaged to," he managed to stammer at last.

Hackness laughed sarcastically.

"Funny, when you see each other every day at the hospital," he jibed.

"Alan goes on holidays sometimes," put in Blyth quickly.

"Was that where he met her?"

Blyth shrugged his shoulders and spoke lightly.

"Seems likely, doesn't it?"

"Hasn't she ever been to see him at the hospital?" asked Hackness casually.

"Never."

The reply was firm, decisive. Blyth felt assured that this was the right answer.

Hackness pursed his lips.

"Funny," he cried sardonically, "when they were engaged—he lives there, doesn't he?"

"He has a consulting room in Hertford Street, you know," Blyth pointed out dryly.

"But he keeps his personal belongings at the hospital—those curios—the Venus——"

"Oh, yes," Blyth broke in eagerly, "The Venus is too valuable to leave about a consulting room."

There was a pause; a pause during which the two men avoided each other's eyes, the

one deliberately scheming a plan of attack, the other priming himself desperately, alert for the defence. Suddenly Hackness turned and staring fixedly at his victim reverted to his first weapon.

"Funny you didn't know they had been engaged," he said slowly, his eyes all the time intent on Blyth, eager for any sign of confusion.

"Oh, I don't know." Billy's voice was a little too casual. "Alan's not a babbler——"

"How long ago was it that they got engaged?"

Like a rapier Hackness's insistent voice broke in upon his floundering. The sudden question disconcerted Blyth and he stuttered uneasily:

"Oh—some—er—time ago."

There was a pause while Hackness eyed his victim steadily, a grim smile playing round his lips.

"Six months—about?" he said at last.

The question was cleverly put. There was a note in his voice which urged insistently that "Yes" would be the proper answer, would settle the query definitely and dismiss the subject for ever. Blyth fell headlong into the trap.

"Yes," he said.

Hackness nodded his head, then murmured in exactly the same tone as before.

"Before Webb's death, in fact?"

"Yes—" said Blyth unwittingly, then stopped aghast.

What was that half-smile he had caught in the other's eyes? Why the sudden gleam, so sudden that it was gone again in one fleeting

moment? Something was wrong here. He had blundered badly. What had he said? A strained look lined his face as he threw his thoughts back desperately and reviewed his replies. Hackness allowed him no time in which to retract, however. His smile was triumphant.

"Then she was engaged to both Webb and Fergusson at the same time," he pounced.

Good God! what a fool he had been. Blyth grew red with annoyance and dismay.

"I didn't say—I mean—I'm a duffer at dates—" he struggled wildly.

Hackness ignored this. When he spoke his voice was calm and steady as though Blyth's statement had thrown the light of reason on to what was dim before, explaining all.

"Then, of course, it was on Fergusson's account that she broke it off with Webb just before the poor fellow—er—died."

He stared at Blyth coolly, playing with him, dangerous as a cat about to strike.

"Look here, Hacker," burst out his victim angrily. "Webb was a friend of Alan's. Kindly think what you're implying!"

The other arched his eyebrows sardonically.

"But if it was six months," he pointed out.

"I didn't say it was six months," said Blyth firmly, his voice thick with annoyance, "and, anyway, you said 'about'."

"Oh, of course." Having found out all he wanted to know Hackness could afford to

wait for his victim to cool down. "And after all, it doesn't matter, does it? The thing that concerns you and me is—that they've made it up again and we're both out of the running."

He eyed Blyth narrowly, eager to detect any sign of jealousy, but for the moment relief, heartfelt and intense, swept all other emotion from Billy's face. He felt that he had eluded a very great danger; felt incredulous at his escape. With a shaking hand he lit a cigarette, but when he spoke his voice was firm and steady.

"I'm jolly glad to hear they have fixed things up," he said stoutly. "Old Alan is the one man alive who's worthy of her!"

"They're not married yet!" retorted the Inspector dryly. "Funny you didn't know she was your patient's sister."

"Can't make out how you knew!" grumbled Blyth. "After all, she's using a different name—or so you say!"

"I'd seen her photograph at the Yard under the name of Adams," said Hackness slowly.

"Betty's photograph at Scotland Yard!"

Blyth looked furious. His eyes flashed dangerously.

"Well, of course—you remember we had to enquire into the circumstances of Webb's death," pointed out Hackness. "His fiancée was an important factor—since she broke off the engagement and caused the whole catastrophe."

A heavy frown clouded Blyth's face.

"That's a disgusting thing to say, Hackness," he cried angrily.

"It's true," retorted the other; then very significantly he added: "Webb wasn't in the habit of getting drunk—was he?"

"Of course not!" came the indignant response.

"Well then, it doesn't take much gumption to realize that he was trying to drown the shock of his girl's chucking him."

There was a short pause.

"Who told you she chucked him?" asked Blyth.

"Fergusson—and what's more, he gave that as the reason Webb messed the operation."

Hackness waited for Blyth to answer. Red with anger at his own impotence to cope with the other's deadly skill in this wordy battle, Blyth opened his mouth to speak and then shut it again helplessly. The more he said the deeper did he sink into this stupendous morass of Hackness's creation. He glared angrily at his tormentor, his eyes blazing with defiance. There was an ugly glint in the Inspector's voice as he continued:

"He got that from Webb himself if you remember. And he didn't know the name of Webb's fiancée—then!"

"He did," broke in Blyth eagerly, thinking that here, at last, he could score. "We both told you her name was Betty!"

Hackness shrugged his shoulders.

"Betty what? You didn't know. In any

case, as you knew her here as Betty Bryant you couldn't have guessed that this Betty was the girl who—was mixed up in that nasty case of your friend Webb's death."

Blyth was shaking: his hand clenched and unclenched wildly. When he spoke his voice was hoarse with anger.

"It wasn't her fault . . . how could it be? . . . Damn it all, man, you're not implying that?"

Hackness glanced at him coldly.

"We know her brother shot him. And he died in your hospital."

"Well?" burst in Blyth wrathfully. "*We* didn't put him there—the constable brought him. And to us he was just Number Six, King's Ward, as I told you last night."

"To *you*—yes—but it seems strange that Fergusson should not have known—when he has actually been engaged to the man's sister," retorted Hackness dryly.

"Afterwards—of course, afterwards. That's obvious," said Blyth quickly. "I tell you I'm a duffer at dates. I can't say exactly when Alan met her—and in any case he's always known her as Betty Bryant, as he told you yesterday."

Hackness passed this over and went on smoothly:

"Naturally! You don't know—but they must have got engaged very quickly after—to have time to break it off—and then—meet here unexpectedly."

"Nonsense! All that business was six months ago. There's been heaps of time for any modern couple to get engaged, married and divorced by now."

There was a pause. Hackness suddenly spoke musingly:

"It seems strange she never came to the hospital——"

But Billy Blyth had had enough.

"Oh, chuck it, man!" he begged wearily. "What does it matter if she did or not?"

"But you said positively that she had not been there," came the retort, bland and incisive.

"How can I——" started Blyth wildly, but he pulled himself up quickly, remembering that on this vital point he must be definite. He continued firmly: "I am positive. Fergusson has a fixed rule. He sees no one there at all."

"You're sure she hasn't seen him there?"

"Positive."

Hackness paused. His hands thrust deep into his pockets, he took the vacant seat next to Blyth.

"It's odd you didn't recognize her name as that of Fergusson's one-time fiancée—" he suggested.

"It's odd you didn't recognize her from having seen her photograph," parried Blyth, carrying the war into the enemy's camp. He was on his guard now, cool and alert.

"I knew I'd seen her face," answered Hackness musingly, "but I couldn't remember where until Fergusson supplied the link and

gave my memory a jolt. Then I realized she was using another name. Besides," he added thoughtfully, "the photograph didn't half do her justice—it's her colouring——"

Blyth nodded.

"Yes, it's—she's just——" he broke off and sighed. "Well, old Alan's the only man who's good enough for her, that's certain."

Hackness frowned heavily. This assumption of Fergusson's undoubted superiority irritated him.

"I shouldn't think Fergusson much of a catch myself."

"Why not?" asked Blyth. "He's rapidly making a name——"

"Yes—but all doctors are liable to—scandal."

The menace in this last word angered Blyth.

"No scandal whatever could attach to Alan!" he said defiantly.

"Couldn't it? We'll see——"

Hackness laughed nastily, his eyes gleaming with derision.

"Look here," Blyth could scarcely control his voice sufficiently to utter the words, "you—if you think you can hint things like that and get away with it——"

"Why didn't Fergusson operate on her brother?" broke in Hackness sharply.

Blyth winced. He was silent a moment, breathing heavily, striving desperately to master his anger. When he spoke it was in a much quieter, more pacific tone.

"Why should he, if he didn't think the case—suitable?"

The other smiled derisively.

"Didn't he? Would you say that on oath, Dr. Blyth?"

For a second Blyth flinched. He glared stonily at the Inspector, his face very set, but when he spoke there was still a hint of defiance in his voice:

"Yes, I would! By God, I would! So there——"

"And would the sister in charge at the hospital say that on oath, Blyth?" put in Hackness softly.

Blyth hesitated. He was feeling desperate, at bay. Whatever he said was picked to pieces, altered, distorted. He would fight against this wily foe no longer. Biting his lips he looked round wildly in search of escape. It came immediately. There was a sound of light footsteps tripping down the stairs, then a vision of white and blue entered the room. Betty—for it was she—stopped dead on the threshold as she caught sight of them both, then walked slowly towards them, the smile which had brightened her face vanishing instantly. There was about their attitude a certain tenseness, an atmosphere of suspense and battle which she quickly sensed. Throwing them a casual greeting she walked leisurely towards the french windows leading to the terrace, but Hackness's voice, cool and dangerous, stopped her flight.

"I was just asking Billy," he said pointedly,

" when it was that you first got engaged to our friend Fergusson, Miss—er—Bryant ? "

The girl started involuntarily and glanced with consternation at Blyth. It was obvious to both men that she was wondering what he had said, fearing lest her answer should not tally.

" Less than six months ago," broke in Blyth quickly. " I couldn't get it nearer than that, Betty. I'm such a duffer at dates."

" You must be, Billy," the girl retorted lightly. " Why, I didn't know Alan then."

Hackness gave her a searching glance.

" When did you first meet Fergusson ? " he asked quietly.

" Why—do you know, I'm as big a duffer at dates as Dr. Blyth, Mr. Hackness."

Hackness looked incredulous.

" He tells me you've never been to the hospital to see Fergusson," he said pointedly.

She was staring at him wide-eyed.

" Why should I go to the hospital to see him ? " she asked in a puzzled way.

" Seeing that he lives there——"

There was a cunning significance in Hackness's voice, and Betty realized instantly that she had said the wrong thing. Her lips trembled and she looked helpless, irresolute. She glanced uneasily at Blyth.

" Oh—" she faltered, " I'd really rather not talk about that time, if you don't mind. I was such a silly—to quarrel and all that—but as Alan has forgiven me——"

She paused and smiled rather pathetically

at the Inspector. He stared at her thoughtfully for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is Fergusson, by the by?" he asked.

A wave of alarm swept over Betty's face. She turned to Blyth anxiously.

"Isn't he down yet?"

Blyth shook his head.

"I haven't seen him," he answered uneasily.

"Run up and see, Billy. He may be ill or something," said Hackness peremptorily.

On the instant Blyth moved to the door . . . but stopped suddenly. It was obvious this was only another of Hackness's moves. Like a pawn in the hands of some master player he was to be sent from the room while Betty was subjected to a torturing cross-examination. This must be avoided at all costs; turning resolutely, Blyth strode back into the room and said lightly:

"Oh, he'll be all right. Old Alan can look after himself. He may have gone out, Betty——"

A waiter entering the room interrupted him. He was balancing a tray on which some fragrant cups of coffee were perched precariously. Hackness waited until the tray had come to rest on the table, then turned quickly to the waiter.

"Has Mr. Fergusson gone out, Jean?"

"*Non, monsieur*——"

Betty broke in at once.

"Run up and see why he isn't down, Jean; there's a dear."

"Jean can't leave the tables, Betty. Billy can go——" said Hackness irritably.

The waiter, his brows furrowed in perplexity, glanced anxiously from one to the other. There was something here he could not understand; something behind the very simple little request which made it vital, momentous. There was a critical pause until Betty spoke again.

"I'm sure Jean will go for me; won't you, Jean?"

She smiled at him charmingly and the waiter beamed.

"*Mais certainement, mademoiselle*——"

He swung round and made for the door, but on the instant a voice called imperatively from the terrace.

"Jean—bring me some coffee at once, please."

The waiter hesitated.

"*Mais oui, miladi,*" he said at last. "One leetle meenit——"

But the voice was insistent.

"At once, please—come along——"

Jean shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly at Betty, removed three of the coffee cups from his tray on to their table and picking it up once more bore it carefully out on to the terrace.

There was a pause. The three looked at each other quickly, their faces reflecting very different emotions. Betty looked worried, Blyth annoyed, while on Hackness's face a faint smile mocked them jeeringly. Suddenly Betty glanced at her watch. She started involuntarily and cried out in alarm.

"It's eleven already! Please go up and see how Alan is, Billy—please——"

Blyth stood irresolute. He also felt anxious and uneasy as to Alan's absence. "The right to die when they choose" . . . his friend's remark, pregnant with fearful meaning, flashed across his brain. He moved a few paces forward, and then stopped and stared uncertainly at Betty. How could he leave her to face Hackness alone? The man was clever, diabolically clever, and she ignorant even of the fact that he knew her name was Adams. So thought Blyth, and he clenched his hands angrily. Hackness was staring at him smilingly.

"I think you'd better, Billy," he said at last.

"Yes—please do."

The girl spoke urgently and, her fears increasing his own, Blyth turned with reluctance.

"Oh, all right," he muttered, and hastened quickly out of the room.

They heard him running lightly up the stairs and glanced at each other cautiously. The ugly sneering smile fled from Hackness's face. He turned courteously to Betty.

"Do sit down," he begged, pulling forward a chair, but the girl shook her head.

"I think I'll go on to the terrace——"

She moved uneasily towards the windows, but Hackness spoke quickly.

"But why? You're not avoiding me? Isn't it bad enough that I've got to give you up to Fergusson? Without being treated as a leper——"

He spoke gently, pathetically and for a moment the girl's heart smote her. His manner touched her. It was so unexpectedly humble and resigned.

"I'm sorry!"

She turned reluctantly from the windows and sank into the chair. Taking one of the cups of coffee she started to sip it uneasily. Hackness slipped into a chair by her side and continued in the same gentle, constrained tone:

"Oh, I'm not grumbling. Fergusson's a jolly good chap."

Betty smiled at him in surprise.

"He is, isn't he?" she cried with pleasure gladdening her voice.

Hackness nodded.

"You've no idea how good he was to me when we were at school together. The other chaps were inclined to bully, but he stood up for me." He paused a moment, staring in front of him; then added slowly, "I shan't forget it in a hurry."

Betty gave him a quick glance.

"That was just like him," she agreed.

"Yes, they say the boy is father to the man, don't they? Fergusson was just the same as a boy as he is now. Had the same taste for odd curios, too."

"Had he?"

The girl was interested: she had forgotten all her distrust, all her misgivings in connection with this man, and felt amazed that she had ever feared him.

"He had some funny little ivory gods," Hackness was saying. "Chinese I think they were—squatty little things."

"I know. I've seen them."

He glanced at her eagerly.

"I say—do you know about those odd things too?"

She smiled.

"Oh, yes. I've a lot at home."

"Have you?" Hackness's voice was full of interest. "What sort of things?"

"From Africa. My father had plantations there——"

"Negro carvings?"

"Yes, and pottery, and so on."

There was a pause. Hackness was gazing at her thoughtfully.

"They say those native things—carvings and pottery—are really quite beautiful," he said slowly.

"Oh, they are."

The topic had always interested the girl vitally, and she was delighted to have an eager listener.

"It's surprising how artistic some of their work is," she said earnestly. "The shapes of the vessels and the quaint, coloured figures—the totems——"

"How awfully jolly." Hackness sighed longingly. "You know, I've always wished I could travel."

She glanced at him serenely.

"Have you?"

He nodded.

"When I was a kid," he said thoughtfully, "I used to be always reading travel books—especially about Africa." He turned to her suddenly. "I suppose if your father had plantations there, you've been there?"

The girl shook her head regretfully.

"No, I haven't. I was born in England after my father had retired."

"And he never took you out?" Hackness cried in surprise.

"He had grown to hate the place. He was always having malaria," she explained.

"Then you only know these things from seeing them in England—in your father's home?" he said casually.

"I went to Frankfort to see the Jaspert collection," she answered.

He was looking at her narrowly, but when he spoke his voice was still light and calm.

"Had they a thing called a Hottentot Venus there?"

"Oh, no! The Hottentot Venus isn't African. It's paleolithic," she said quickly.

Hackness laughed.

"Paleolithic? That means something made by prehistoric man, doesn't it?" he asked gaily.

"Yes. Those Hottentot Venuses are thousands and thousands of years old."

"Whatever do they call them Hottentot for then?" he asked laughingly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Just because of their funny figures; they're not exactly elegant, you know."

She was staring straight before her, entirely absorbed in the subject. Hackness breathed quickly.

"Pretty heavy, I suppose?" he said casually.

"Oh, no. Quite light——"

A triumphant gleam sprang into his eyes. He had succeeded. He pounced instantly.

"You've had one in your hand—where—where——"

Betty jumped violently. The attack was so unexpected, so incredibly sudden. She stared at him wide-eyed, unable to understand, for the moment, all that his question and manner portended. She had been so entirely absorbed in their conversation that it took her a few seconds to assemble her thoughts, to realize her danger. Then her eyes dilated with fear and remorse. She saw the trap into which she had fallen and struggled wildly to escape.

"I haven't," she protested desperately. "I—they're so small——"

"You've handled one," broke in Hackness peremptorily. "You can't deny it."

He was glaring at her ruthlessly, and the girl lost her head.

"I—I—at some museum—perhaps——" she stammered panic-stricken.

"It wasn't at a museum," cried Hackness savagely. His tone was bullying, brutal. "It was at Fergusson's room at the hospital."

The girl quailed before him.

"It wasn't—it wasn't," she protested wildly, her hands gripped tightly together.

"It was!" His voice was official, brow-beating. "He is the only man who has one in England!"

"But—I've been abroad—" she faltered wildly.

The man was relentless. He broke in triumphantly.

"To Frankfort, where they haven't got one. You said so yourself. No. You saw that Hottentot Venus at Fergusson's room at the hospital—you can't deny it——"

Betty's eyes gleamed with resentment.

"You're bullying me—this is the third degree," she cried desperately.

"What if it is?" The man laughed scornfully. "Do you think that will stop me? I mean to get the truth."

"It's not the truth. Billy told you I've never been to the hospital."

"You have—you saw the Venus there—you have been there—and, what's more, the porter will recognize you and swear to it." He paused a moment then added more slowly. "Also your name is not Bryant . . . it is . . . Adams."

The girl stared at him in horror. How could she hope to escape this man? He knew everything; there was no retreat. It had been such a fatal mistake, changing her name. She had rendered herself vulnerable to every suspicion, reduced her defences to nothing.

And yet . . . she had felt so happy as Betty Bryant. Her past, with all its remorse and misery belonged no longer to her, she had shed it with her name. It was part of some other girl, some poor, unfortunate girl named Betty Adams, to whom she bore no kin. But now . . . the game of make-believe was at an end, reality with all its sordidness, justice with all its injustice had her tight in their grasp. She stared helplessly at the man before her, rigid with despair.

"You went there to beg Fergusson not to operate the day your brother died—you can't deny it." His voice was imperious, hectoring. "It is useless. You'll have to swear on oath to the truth . . ."

"No, no—not as his wife—you can't make me swear as his wife," she cried brokenly, her last defences swept away, uncaring now how much he knew.

An ugly gleam shone in his eyes.

"So that's your game?" he cried brutally. "*That's* why you've got engaged? But that won't help you now! To marry him *now* is to give the game away—to convince everyone that he is guilty."

For a second she stared at him incredulously, and then burying her face in her hands she began to sob hopelessly.

Hackness watched her curiously. A slight compunction aroused by the sight of her tears drove away, for a moment, the victorious police officer. When he spoke his tone was much gentler, much less hectoring.

"Why should you mind? You don't love him? You only pretended that nonsense about being engaged to cover things," he said slowly.

The girl looked up at him suddenly. Her eyes were full of tears, her face white and miserable, and his heart smote him. He stared at her searchingly.

"I can't bear the thought that he is to suffer through me—it will be the third man I've—ruined—I can't bear it!"

Her voice was low, passionate.

"You don't love him—do you?" he asked persistently.

"I . . . I . . . I don't know. Last night I almost thought I did," she admitted brokenly.

Hackness bit his lips.

"But this morning . . . ?"

"Oh . . . don't make me say it." She glanced round wildly, then drawing herself up glared at him defiantly. "I am prepared to marry him!"

Hackness arched his brows sardonically.

"In the face of my . . . disapproval?" he asked icily.

She flushed angrily, her eyes blazing with defiance.

"Have I to ask your permission?"

"In the circumstances—yes—I think you have," retorted Hackness curtly. "And I withhold it!"

Betty turned to him, all her defiance gone. She was afraid of him now, desperately afraid.

There was an agony of pleading in her voice as she spoke:

"Mr. Hackness . . . you've said he has been good to you—you've said he was a good fellow . . . are you going to ruin him?"

There was a pause, a pause during which Hackness stared at her fixedly, a curious, searching expression on his face. At last, very quietly, he answered:

"That depends on you."

She looked her bewilderment.

"On me?"

Hackness nodded.

"Listen," he said slowly. "A short time ago you said that . . . *he* would be the third man you had ruined . . ."

A spasm of pain twitched her face, her lips trembled, and he continued quickly:

"But you haven't ruined him . . . yet."

He stopped and stared fixedly at her, that curious searching expression deepening on his face. But she was looking baffled, perplexed.

"I don't understand," she said at last.

"Well, you can't deceive *me* now—but—no one else knows," he pointed out significantly.

A flash of joy lit up her face. She stared at him speechlessly for a moment as though incredulous; then leaning towards him she took his hand.

"You mean, you'll keep the secret? Oh, how good of you——"

But Hackness interrupted her quickly and gently released his hand.

"I'll keep his secret on one condition—that you marry me!"

All the happiness fled from her face, leaving it drawn and miserable. She rose from her seat and stared with loathing and contempt into his eyes.

"You want to make a bargain of it?" Her voice was choked with emotion. "Oh, that's shameful!"

"Nonsense! We all take our advantage when we see it." Hackness spoke irritably, but he added slowly: "Of course, you need not accept——"

"You mean, if I don't, you'll make it public? Ruin him?"

Her eyes flashed with resentment, but Hackness was unmoved.

"My dear girl, it's my duty—and it will gain me my promotion."

"Oh," she wrung her hands together wrathfully, "and you said he'd been kind to you at school. You said you'd never forget it."

The man grinned sardonically.

"I haven't forgotten it," he cried. "I'll speak of it every day of my life—when you're my wife!"

"You mean that! That you'll ruin him if I don't—don't marry you?"

Her voice was desperate, hysterical. Hackness shrugged his shoulders, eyeing her narrowly.

"Oh, if you prefer to refuse me and risk it—wait to see what I'll do—it may be too

late, of course—but why should you care? You don't love the fellow."

She stared at him uncertainly for a moment, wondering perhaps whether he would relent, whether he was only torturing her for his amusement, having no real intention of carrying out his threat. Only for a moment, however. His eyes held too sure a purpose. She burst out despairingly:

"Oh, no, no, no! I can see it's true. You'll do it."

There was a pause, and then the man moved nearer to her and spoke gently, almost yearningly:

"And you'll—marry me?"

She was staring before her, a dull, hopeless look on her face, and when she spoke her voice was toneless and flat.

"I can't ruin him! If it's the only alternative——"

A triumphant light glowed in the man's eyes. He turned to her eagerly.

"Yes?"

Betty shut her eyes, then opened them wearily and stared with a lifeless, numb expression on her face, out of the window to where the mountains in cold austerity lifted their peaks to the blue heavens, the heavens which held no mercy, no compunction for all the misery within her heart. At last, with her face still averted from Hackness, her eyes dull and listless, she murmured faintly:

"Yes."

A swift flush mounted the man's cheeks, then faded away as quickly as it had come. There was an almost ecstatic glow in his eyes. All the bitterness, the ruthless sullenness had fled from him; almost a tender smile played about his lips.

"You shan't regret it, dear," he said gently. "You don't love him—I'll make you love me!"

He seized her hands and was about to kiss her reluctant, still averted face, when approaching footsteps caused him to move away quickly. A second later Billy Blyth and Fergusson entered the room. One glance at the two by the window told Alan plainly that something vital had happened. What that something was he could only dimly guess, but Betty's tragic face was sufficient proof to its disastrous import. In an instant he was on guard, master of himself, ready to use every weapon in his power to foil the enemy. Smiling unconcernedly he walked slowly up to them and turned to the girl.

"Good-morning, Betty—sorry I'm late. I lay awake most of the night and then over-slept." He came close up to her then added softly: "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

The girl looked up at him miserably, her face a quivering protest against her fate.

"It's no use, Alan," she murmured tonelessly. "He knows everything; that I'm Betty Adams, and . . . and——"

Fergusson's eyebrows arched inquiringly.

"No use? I—don't understand——"

Hackness moved a step forward and smiled exultantly.

"Betty is going to marry me, Fergusson," he cried in triumph.

"Betty!"

The cry, incredulous and bitter, came from Billy Blyth. He looked dumbfounded and aghast, shaken to the core of his being by this appalling news, and stared with stormy, reproachful eyes at Betty. But Alan was quick to master the occasion. His voice was cool and nonchalant and his words came deliberately:

"Jilting me again, Betty?"

For a moment the girl stared at him blindly, her mind too chaotic to understand his question, but suddenly she realized its full significance, gasped in unutterable dismay and grief, then burying her head between her hands sobbed hopelessly. So he, too, had deserted her, accepted with calm unconcern this ghastly sacrifice she was making for him—the long years ahead all hampered with regret, her hopes of happiness entirely slain, her peace of mind for ever shattered—accepted it carelessly with sublime indifference.

Alan watched her for a moment. Abruptly he broke the silence:

"Nonsense, my dear! Don't cry. It can't be helped. The game has gone against us."

Hackness gave him a surprised grin.

"Glad you take it in so sportsmanlike a spirit, Fergusson."

"Oh, well," Alan's voice was careless,

unmoved. "I knew Betty didn't really care for me. She only agreed to marry me out of sheer unselfishness."

But this was too much for the girl to bear. She jerked her head up and glared at him angrily.

"That's not quite true."

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, we needn't go into the definition of our feelings, dear. But the main thing is—you don't love me, so it is not, perhaps, altogether a misfortune that things are turning out as they are."

Betty stared at him amazed, a look of sheer bewilderment clouding her eyes. Was it possible that anyone could be so blind, so utterly uncaring?

"But don't you see——" she started wildly, but Alan broke in at once.

"I see that a very dear unselfish girl is looking tired and distressed, and that won't do. Now, forget all about it, and go out and enjoy yourself."

He smiled at her cheerfully, but the girl looked stunned.

"Enjoy myself!"

She gave a short laugh, a laugh which revealed, plainer than any words, how great had been the shock of disillusion. But Alan was still unmoved.

"Well, people are expected to enjoy themselves when they are newly engaged, aren't they?" he remarked in casual, matter-of-fact tones.

Even Hackness was amazed at such complete indifference.

"You don't seem very upset, anyway, Fergusson," he laughed jeeringly.

Alan swung round and stared at him. For the first time a look of anger gleamed in his eyes, and when he spoke the words came bitterly, full of hate and venom:

"I've told you—I knew Betty didn't really love me."

All this time Blyth, his face a turmoil of diverse emotions, remained silent, glancing in appalled bewilderment from one to the other, utterly confounded by his friend's indifference, his lack of feeling. That Betty was not doing this incredible thing of her own volition was plainly evident. Had Alan been annoyed, indignant, wild with anger, icy with disdain, Blyth could have sympathized, understood, but . . . he did none of these things. His voice was cool, dispassionate; he treated the whole affair as entirely trivial and Billy's heart was sore and resentful. Now he could restrain himself no longer.

"But—hang it all, Alan—" he burst out, "whether she loved you or not—she's *Betty*——"

He broke off, for Alan was smiling at him curiously. He placed one hand on Billy's shoulder and, unseen by the others, gave it a warning pressure, but at the same time his voice, cool and uncaring, was saying lightly:

"I'm afraid poor Billy is the one to be pitied. You know," he turned smilingly to Betty, "he really *is* hard hit about you, Betty."

A great light gladdened Blyth's heart. All was well! This monstrous attitude, heartless, unfeeling, was only a pose. Something very different lay behind. What that something was he cared not; sufficient for him that Alan knew. On the instant he was eager to assist. Turning quickly to his friend, he said quietly:

"Oh, of course, if she really prefers Hacker——"

Fergusson shot him a glance of approval.

"Quite," he answered dryly. "We can't prevent her marrying the man she chooses, can we?" He turned to Betty. "Why didn't you tell me last night that you loved Hacker, Betty?"

But this was too much for the girl. His cool assumption that she was pleasing herself, that of her own free will she had chosen to marry Hackness, completely unnerved her. Bitter with resentment and anger she burst out furiously:

"But I don't—and you know I don't——"

Fergusson raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"You don't love him? And yet you're going to marry him? But why?" he asked.

There was an awkward silence. The girl glanced helplessly at the three men before her.

"Because—because I've let him trap me and . . . those are his terms."

"I see."

Alan's voice was very quiet, menacing in its grim repression, and he turned to Hackness imperiously:

"I think a little explanation is required, Hackness. Perhaps it would be better if Miss Bry . . . er . . . Miss Adams left us."

He walked towards the french windows leading to the terrace and, with a dazed expression on her face, Betty followed. But Hackness stepped forward quickly and seized her arm.

"I scarcely think it's necessary, is it?" he remarked dryly. "Isn't it rather my own business? Mine and Betty's?"

There was an icy glint in Alan's eyes now. He looked relentless, vindictive. The mask of indifference had slipped away and a certain deadly frigidness, an unnatural tensity, gave a glimpse of the volcanic wrath which was simmering beneath that cold restraint.

"Betty said something about a trap," he said firmly. "Isn't that perhaps—a little my business too?"

Hackness shrugged his shoulders. He also had sensed that Alan's attitude had been a pose and the fact disconcerted him.

"As you will," he said with forced lightness, "although I should have thought you could have guessed."

"I prefer to hear it from your lips," remarked Alan coldly.

Hackness smiled mirthlessly.

"Certainly. Betty has let out that she went to the hospital to see you. It's now only a question of a clever counsel—Crown counsel, my dear Fergusson, are notoriously

efficient—aided perhaps by the testimony of the porter and sister at the hospital—and I think we shall get at the whole truth regarding the circumstances of her brother's death when he was in your care."

He stopped and glanced defiantly at the man before him, an ugly gleam of triumph in his eyes. There was a long pause. Fergusson was staring at him as though in fascination, almost unable to believe that such infamy could exist. To buy a wife at the price of his silence! Alan felt sick with loathing at the thought. He turned to Betty and a long look passed between them. So she had been prepared to marry this wretch, to secure his own safety at the price of her happiness. Alan's heart contracted with pity and admiration. She met his glance searchingly, her face lighting up as she began to realize that his indifference had been forced, a pose assumed in order to deceive. At last, his voice bitter with contempt and hatred, Alan turned to Hackness:

"And your silence has been . . . bought . . . on my behalf?"

Hackness shrugged his shoulders.

"Betty has agreed to marry me," he muttered.

Alan stared at him appraisingly.

"I see . . . well, after all—even if she doesn't love you, it's no worse for her than marrying me. She didn't love me, either."

Betty swung round at him furiously.

"Oh, but I wasn't forced into marrying *you*——"

"You were, my dear," Fergusson said lightly, "by your own over-sensitive conscience. It is really the same force at work now. And after all, Hackness is a very good fellow," he added sociably.

Betty's eyes flashed. She was livid with fury, humiliated to the depths of her soul by Alan's continued unconcern.

"If that's how you take it—I suppose I may as well marry him," she burst out bitterly.

"But, of course," Alan's voice was bland, complaisant, "the only thing is—well, see that you get what you're paying for——"

"What do you mean?" interrupted Hackness indignantly.

Alan turned to him.

"Well, she's marrying you to save me, isn't she? And herself too, of course. It would be just as deadly for her if the truth came out."

"Then you admit it's the truth?" rapped out Hackness.

Alan shrugged his shoulders.

"What does that matter now?" he said easily. "I take it, this marriage is to scotch your sting? I mean, you really will not take any steps to stir up this mud if she marries you? No one else is likely to do so, if you don't, are they?"

Hackness laughed scornfully. Fergusson's

intense anxiety as to his own safety surprised and delighted him beyond measure. Gone was the courteous, dignified surgeon; in his place stood a man bargaining for security, uncaring, oblivious to all else save his own immunity from exposure. Nothing could have suited Hackness better. Would any girl forgive such cowardice, such boundless egoism?

"You may take it that I am the only one you have to fear, Fergusson," he sneered.

Alan breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good! Then—we may rely on it that this ends the matter?"

"You may," agreed Hackness contemptuously.

There was a short pause; then Alan said thoughtfully:

"Still, you might break your word——"

"Really, Fergusson!"

"Well, you might——" insisted Alan steadily.

"I should be bringing scandal on my own wife if I did," came the bitter retort.

Alan shrugged his shoulders and spoke indifferently:

"You might even want to do that some day——"

"Mr. Fergusson!" broke in Betty, her voice choked with anger.

Alan turned to her blandly.

"Oh, my dear, let's put sentiment aside. This is a business matter. Love doesn't last

for ever. It *is* just conceivable that Hackness might want to marry someone else some day and this might give him a chance——"

He turned quickly from Betty, dumb with indignation, and said seriously to Hackness:

"Look here, Hackness, have you any objection to giving us some security? I am thinking of Betty just as much as of myself, of course."

Hackness laughed delightedly. The man was playing into his hands, exceeding all his hopes.

"Of course you are. I am sure Betty appreciates it, don't you, dear——"

He turned to the girl and grinned contemptuously. Her cheeks were flaming, her eyes glittering with rage. She turned her back deliberately on Alan.

"Don't speak to me—any of you——"

"But I am thinking of you as well, Betty." Into Alan's voice had crept a shade of compunction. "I think if you marry Hackness like this he ought to give you some business acknowledgment—something in writing——"

"Oh, how can you——"

She swung round and glared at him incredulously.

"It's all very well," he continued calmly, "but, well, I'd feel easier if he did, and I think if he means what he says that he should do it."

"Of course I mean it . . ." put in Hackness with feeling—"but I think *Betty*

takes my word." He turned to the girl and spoke tenderly: "Don't you, Betty?"

Alan laughed, an ugly sound.

"Yes, that's one way of getting out of it!" he remarked scornfully.

"I'm not getting out of it," cried Hackness in anger.

Fergusson shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"You're not doing it, I notice."

Betty shot him a look of the utmost contempt.

"I don't want you to do it, Hacker," she blazed.

"It isn't only you, Betty dear——" Alan's voice was stubborn, unyielding, "as I said before, this does concern me too——"

"Oh, give him what he wants," cried Betty passionately, "and be done with it and then—let us go and never speak to him again."

A triumphant gleam lit up Hackness's eyes. He turned to Alan and spoke contemptuously:

"All right, Fergusson! What do you want me to give you?"

"Oh, just a word or two," said Alan quickly. He glanced at the girl and a shadow crossed his face. "I say, I never meant to upset Betty like this——"

But the girl flounced away from him in scorn.

"Give him his paper and let us get away from here and be done with him!" she cried angrily.

"Come along, Fergusson," Hackness grinned with delight. "Dictate, and I'll write what you like."

He removed a notebook from his pocket, tore out one sheet and, with pen gripped ready for action, waited for Alan to speak.

"Oh I think this will do," said Alan quickly: "'*I give my word that I will never divulge what I have learned with reference to the death of Robert Adams on consideration that his sister agrees to be my wife.*' That's right, I think?" He turned again to Betty and added deprecatingly: "But, of course, if Betty would rather not. Betty, dear—I——"

He touched her lightly on the arm, but she turned her back on him.

"Sign it and let us go!"

Hackness, who had been writing rapidly, glanced over the paper quickly and then signed it with a flourish.

"You've done for yourself, Fergusson——" he cried triumphantly.

"Have I?" Fergusson spoke quietly, then turned to Blyth. "Just witness that, Billy!"

With almost suspicious eagerness Blyth reached for the paper and added his signature. There was a bright gleam in his eyes as he handed it to Alan. Again Alan had won; again his devious brain had discovered a loop-hole of escape. He grinned significantly as Fergusson carefully folded the document and placed it in his pocket. The surgeon's manner had changed miraculously; he was smiling

at Hackness, smiling with easy arrogance.

"And now, Hackness," he said quietly, his voice firm and authoritative, "I think we may all have the pleasure of wishing you—good-bye."

His altered demeanour startled Hackness exceedingly. He sensed at once that he had made some vital mistake; that Alan held the cards. For a second his face betrayed him; then recovering himself quickly he turned to Betty and cried:

"Betty—come along——"

There was an urgency in his step as he moved towards the door; an urgency which was akin to panic. Betty felt puzzled. She followed him slowly, but Alan and Blyth barred the way.

"Oh, no!" Fergusson spoke firmly. "I don't think Miss Adams will go with you, Hackness. You see, I don't think you can enforce that little arrangement you made with her, in face of the fact that I hold this confession signed by you in the presence of a witness. I rather think that we have drawn your sting."

Hackness stared at him in dumbfounded amazement, stupefied at the realization of his own crass folly. What an unthinking simpleton he had been to play so easily, so unsuspectingly, into Alan's hands. The full significance of all that his imbecility portended was clear to his eyes, but faithful to his nature he determined to bluster through.

"You—what do you mean?" he spluttered

furiously. "Betty has promised to marry me——"

But Alan broke in sternly, his eyes relentless, unwavering.

"She promised under compulsion and the promise is not binding. You cannot exact it, as, if you do, I shall immediately go to Scotland Yard with your confession——"

Hackness laughed scornfully, but under the bravado lay an unmistakable note of fear.

"You can't—without ruining yourself."

Alan's eyes flashed with anger.

"Do you think I care about that?" he cried, completely losing all control. "I should ruin you, too. If I show this paper—you are finished and done with, Hackness. Do you think I'd care if it did ruin me too, so long as I saved Betty from the lifelong misery of marriage with a dirty blackmailer!"

This time Hackness was entirely staggered. He reeled back a few paces and glared wildly at Betty.

"Betty——"

His voice rang with a desperate anguish, but the girl did not seem to hear. She was staring at Alan, staring at him with shining eyes. She seemed to be transported into another world; to be entirely oblivious of her whereabouts, of Blyth, of Hackness, of all else save Alan. Her expression awed the three men, and for a moment no one spoke. Then, her voice breathless with emotion, Betty cried passionately:

"Oh, Alan——"

She stretched out one hand towards him as though entreating forgiveness for all her doubts . . . and on the instant the spell was broken. With a snarl of fury Hackness thrust one hand into his pocket and withdrew a pistol. Before anyone had conceived his purpose he had the weapon aimed at Alan, his finger on the trigger. Like a flash Blyth flung himself upon him and the shot, wild and clamorous in that place of peace, went wide, burying itself within some woodwork. Alan joined in the fray, and in a second Hackness was disarmed. Breathing heavily the beaten man glared defiantly at his captors, his face strained and inhuman, like a stag at bay. There was a moment of tense silence . . . then rapid steps outside and Alphonse, white of face, his eyes alive with panic, dashed into the room. He stood on the threshold a moment and gazed in consternation at the scene before him. On the instant the three men broke away. Hackness moved to the window and stared unseeingly into the distance. Blyth was the first to recover control.

"What's that? Who's been shooting?"

Alphonse, no longer the imperturbable, stormed into the room, waving his hands in frenzied agitation.

"It's all right, Alphonse." Blyth's voice was smooth, unflurried. "No harm done."

"But——"

The little man, his face alive with

suspicion, motioned with shaking hands towards Hackness. The latter had turned round and faced them all. His hands gripped the window sash, his head was bent, his face twitched spasmodically. But Fergusson spoke quickly, airily:

"Just Mr. Hackness's Wild West way of summoning you, Alphonse," he said. "He wants his bill. You see, he's leaving at once—and has only just time to catch the twelve-thirty. Do you mind sending for his luggage?"

There was a pause, a pause hateful to them all. In a silence pregnant with suspense they waited motionless for his reply. Were he to press the question, demand complete and total explanation . . . all would be lost. That secrecy, so vital to them all, irrevocably gone. Their faces, white and strained, they waited breathlessly while he stared with aggrieved, slowly comprehending eyes at each. At last he turned to Betty. She was gazing at Alan, gazing with her soul bare in her eyes for all to see, gazing with that bewildering ecstatic expression, now slightly tinged with fear. For a long moment he watched the girl and then turned suddenly to Alan.

"Vair good, m'sieur——" He nodded meaningly, and swung round at Hackness: "Zis vay, m'sieur, pliz——"

Turning sharply on his heel he walked from the room. Alphonse was wise in his generation. A man's prestige is not enhanced by scandal; hotels are sometimes doomed for all time by

one scene. A Nelson of strategic policy, or so he told himself, he shut his eye and feigned obtuseness. When he had gone the tension was relaxed, but Betty never moved. Making a great effort Hackness seemed to pull himself together, to gain control over his emotions. He turned, his eyes pathetic in their yearning, and gazed at Betty. Deeply absorbed, like a saint at a shrine, she saw nothing, heard nothing, remained in that world of her own where none could follow, her eyes, revealing her soul, intent on Alan. Hackness shut his for a moment, while a look of unutterable pain twisted his face. He opened them at last and laughed derisively.

"You've won, damn you," he snarled at Alan. "Go on—revel in your safety."

"I shall, thank you, Hackness," Alan's voice was quiet, firm, "and so are you safe—for just as long as I am."

Throwing him a glance almost of hatred Hackness swung blindly out of the room; a moment later they heard his heavy steps mounting the stairs. Blyth turned quickly:

"I'll see him off by the train, Alan."

He hastened from the room.

6

The seconds came and went, rushing to that limit of time which man has decreed make up a minute. Yet there was no sound in the

room, and the man and the woman stared at each other without speaking.

Alan at first felt supremely uncomfortable. If ever the inner feelings, usually a closely guarded secret, are written on a face for all the world to see, then Betty provided a shining example. There was a radiant look in her face, an expression of awe, no doubt at her release, and unbounded relief. But there was another look also, a hint of that look which a man or a woman can give only to one other living person. Alan dropped his eyes: he felt that it was indecent to probe thus into the mind of the over-wrought girl, that he had her off her guard.

It cost him an effort: she was damnably attractive as she stood there. A feeling which he could not quite analyse made him long to step forward, take her slender form in his arms and whisper comfort into her little ear through the golden hair which covered it. He was not certain whether this desire came from some real affection or from pity—pity and the knowledge of her secret which her eyes had betrayed to him.

He looked up quickly again, stared at her searchingly. Her eyes met his without flinching: Alan fled to speech for refuge:

"Betty . . . there's no further need for us to be engaged any more, is there?"

For a second that betraying look lingered on, and then on the instant it vanished. She seemed to come back to reality in a flash.

And then something happened to Alan Fergusson. Bitter thoughts came to his mind, bitter reproaches for having driven away from her face something which he wanted desperately to see.

"But things are nicer when they're not necessities, aren't they?"

He had spoken quickly, spoken in accord with the beating of his heart. A great deal, everything to him, depended on her answer.

Like a flower re-opening its petals after a storm her expression brightened under his eyes.

"Much nicer, Alan."

"Betty!"

He took a step towards her, stopped, hesitated. She smiled shyly:

"So if we still remain engaged . . ."

Her voice died away. A faint flush tinged her face and added to her beauty.

"Well?"

"Well . . . I told you last night what engaged couples were supposed to do, didn't I?"

Alan laughed.

"Only before other people in our case . . . you *said*."

"Did I? What silly things we say sometimes, don't we?"

Alan hesitated no longer. In one stride he was by her side, had taken her in his arms. She looked up at him, gently pulled his face to hers . . .

Reluctantly he released her, and saw her smile to him. Suddenly the memory of her face, wild with scorn and anger, returned to him.

"How you hated me only a few minutes ago!" he laughed. "Why—a wounded tigress would have shown more mercy!"

But she shivered with distaste: that time of misery was still too recent, too vivid in her mind to bear remembrance.

"Everything crashed," she faltered unhappily. "First Hackness showed his claws, then . . . you. I felt as though I was living in a nightmare world of bubbles: everyone changed, broke to bits as soon as I trusted them. I had forgotten all my fears of Hackness and . . . he trapped me; and then you came . . . and I wouldn't believe it for a while, all that you implied by your manner, but then . . . I had to." She turned and smiled at him sadly. "You're an abominably good actor, Alan Fergusson!"

Gently Alan drew her to the window and pointed to the mountains, white with beauty, glistening and sparkling in the morning sun.

"Look, Betty, look . . . last night everything was black and gloomy. I could only see their dark, mysterious shapes hidden in obscurity. They were threatening, fearful . . . and now . . ."

He stopped and turned to the girl.

"Well?" she asked slowly.

"Well, dearest, isn't that like us? Last

night . . . gloom for both of us. This morning . . ."

He waved one hand towards the sun-drenched landscape and took hers in the other.

"Fresh air! Betty, my love, we've found it! Fresh air for two!"

Their faces flushed with hope, they moved quickly through the opened french windows out into the glimmering sunshine of the terrace, and set off with quickened steps towards the majestic beauty of the everlasting hills.

Part Four

Part Four

1

SAFETY is a curiously uncertain thing. Security is a word which is meant to convey the same meaning, but security means much more. Safety is a pleasant feeling, security is thoroughly comfortable; safety implies trust, security knows all about the bonds deposited.

So that when Alan Fergusson said he was safe, of what he was thinking was security, and his hearers, with one exception, also understood by the word what he meant to convey. With one exception . . . the man who used the word in its proper meaning. James Hackness would never have said secure: there was too much going on at the back of his mind even at that early stage.

Life is life long before the human being is born: an undefined idea matures into a thought, a line of thought perhaps, which is at the moment of conception without form.

Hope dies hard with a man like James Hackness.

2.

Throughout the afternoon the express train rattled noisily through pleasant country,

country which might even have made a poet lyrical or an artist eager for his canvas. Rocky crags surmounted with snow, lakes, valleys, tiny little châlets hidden in overhanging rock, rivers blue as the sky, waterfalls like sea spray tumbling in torrential beauty down the snowy mountain side; a panorama changing every instant yet always picturesque, majestically grand.

Impossible to toy with the latest outpourings of some magazine wit while such unforgettable loveliness is flitting past; impossible to decline the gift of these final glories to fill the caverns of Memory. Very few travellers on that afternoon express had their eyes averted from the windows, yet there were some whom even these delights had no power to enthral—and among these was James Hackness.

Seated in a corner of a first-class carriage, his head leaning back against the soft upholstery, Hackness was staring with unseeing eyes at the opposite wall. He was looking very tired; there was a bitter twist to his mouth which betokened the nag of some great unhappiness. For many hours he had remained thus without moving and were it not for the fact that his eyes were open, the other occupant of the carriage, an old soldierly looking Englishman, might have believed him to be asleep. But sleep is not easily lured to minds sick with unrest; Hackness was only too wideawake, only too alive to the prickings of regret, regret

that he had ever raised this whirlwind which had driven him forth defenceless in its power.

To return to England thus, humiliated, thwarted, forced to curtail his holiday, dismissed in this arbitrary way like a transgressing schoolboy, by a man for whom he had been nursing a dislike since those far-off days at Standing! There are no people so obnoxious to us as those whom we ourselves have injured, and Hackness had known only too well the reason for Alan's sudden ejection from the captaincy of Standing; and now this man whom Hackness envied and detested had upset all his plans, stolen the girl whom he loved, tied his hands with a rope of his own insensate weaving—crass fool that he had been—and forced him to this flight, ignominious and premature, back to the leaden skies and fogs of London.

Hackness was suffering intensely. He felt ill and weak with the need to restrain his emotion, to stifle his fury under an appearance of conventional calm. If only he had been alone, in a carriage by himself, away from his fellow passenger to whom even now—he was miserably aware—he had become an object of interest. Probably the man thought him physically ill, wondered whether he ought to break through the reserve of unacquaintance and offer him his services. Hackness's lips curled viciously at the thought. He felt that were he spoken to, even though kindliness prompted such speech, his last controls would

snap and he would rage foolishly; he longed to let go the reins, to drop once and for all this icy numbness which so conventionally removed all passion from his face, to show himself to this fellow traveller as the man he was, a creature wild with fury, destitute of hope, ravaged with remorse and regret, seized with an insatiable desire for vengeance.

Betty! Betty! Before his eyes he saw her smiling at him with that irresistible, entirely individual smile, the dimples dancing joyously in her cheeks. He heard her voice gay and friendly calling to him to hasten lest they should be late for lunch. Only yesterday morning she had been his friend. She had liked him—he had felt certain of it. His admiration pleased her. He could have won her, won her in spite of that pretence of coyness, that scene of mock indignation—for such he still thought it—which had heralded the coming of Alan Fergusson.

Alan Fergusson! The name seemed to dance before his eyes in letters of scarlet. Alan Fergusson! Oh, how he longed to be revenged. He would find some way to ruin this man, some way to . . . But, with a pang of bitter self-reproach, he realized his helplessness. How could he be revenged, how could he raise a hurricane of destruction without himself falling victim to his own creation? He clenched his hands in agony at the thought. How could he, Detective-Inspector Hackness of Scotland Yard, have been so imbecile as

to sign his name to such a compromising document? How could he have been so childish, so asinine? . . . yet all his thoughts had been bound up with Betty, his brain had been dimmed, submerged by the call of his heart. Hackness determined that from that moment it would be the other way about: like many another man his career had been endangered by his love for a woman, like many another man he had been tricked, ensnared. A wave of acute misery filled his heart as he remembered that little while, so short, so ecstatic with the promise of bliss, when he had believed his plans victorious, Fergusson in his power, Betty engaged to be his wife!

No wonder he had been dazzled, bewildered with success; no wonder he had fallen such an easy dupe to Alan's cunning. A cynical smile twisted his lips: from now on he would live for vengeance: no human ties should swerve him from his purpose. They were laughing at him now, mocking him, he was ridiculous in their eyes . . . well, they should see if he was indeed such a figure of burlesque. A detective gulled by amateurs! His face burnt hotly at the thought.

Well . . . they should see. His lips set in a stern line while his brain, trained to such skilled reasoning, sought deliberately some invulnerable plan of attack.

3

With weary dragging steps the postman hastened from No. 15, Humber Road, into which house he had just deposited a registered packet, and turned into the comparative shelter of Shadwell Gardens. Towering fir trees edging the path afforded some slight protection from the ceaseless rain, and even such small cover was grateful to the unhappy courier that evening. It was now nearly six o'clock and ever since eight that self-same day the streets of Woking had been treated to a miniature flood: wet to the skin, water squelching from his boots at every step, Jenkins, the postman, who, by now, had exhausted his somewhat extensive vocabulary of descriptive adjectives, paused a moment under a convenient fir tree to sort the few remaining letters he had still to deliver. Intent on this operation he failed to notice a figure hastening after him up the street, and it was only when a rather hoarse voice shouted "Good evening" almost in his ear, that Jenkins who, in his start of surprise, retained his grasp on the letters with some difficulty, realized he was not the only unfortunate wayfarer in Shadwell Gardens on that most uncomfortable evening. This fact, however, did not unduly delight him. He disliked being interrupted when in the act of sorting his letters; he disliked still more being unexpectedly shouted at, and it was with

a very unprepossessing frown that he turned to regard the speaker.

"Sorry if I startled you, postman," continued the voice in the same hoarse accents, "but I was afraid you were about to disappear into some house and I wanted to ask you a question."

The frown on Bill Jenkins' face increased in intensity. He continued to stare with acute displeasure at the man facing him, and James Hackness felt his heart sink within him at the enormity of his task. To scale the heights of Olympus would be child's play in comparison with forcing this crusty, disagreeable old postman to impart certain valuable information, information which Hackness most ardently desired to know.

Suddenly Bill Jenkins spoke and all the misery he had felt that day, all the cold and wet, the weary trampings and endless search for unusual numbers, was given eloquent utterance in the querulous tones of his voice.

"Wanted ter ask me something, is it?" he growled irritably; "well, wot d'you want to know? Out with it. I can't stop 'ere all day . . ."

Hackness interrupted quickly.

"I only wanted to know if you could tell me which side of the road number six is? I want to find a Miss Betty Adams."

A cunning light had crept into the postman's eyes.

"So-oh!" he said slowly, his glance

travelling carefully over the Inspector. "You want to find Miss Betty Adams, do you?"

"Yes." Into Hackness's voice had come a carefully calculated note of impatience. "Will you please tell me on which side is number six?"

"I'll tell you where number six is all right, but you won't find Miss Betty Adams there," replied the postman slowly. "She's . . . she's gone away."

"Gone away."

Hackness's face registered appropriate disappointment and surprise.

"Six months ago," went on the man, now thoroughly warmed up to the subject. The tragedy in number six Shadwell Gardens had been the staple topic of many a long evening at The Stag At Bay and the heart of Bill Jenkins warmed to this stranger to whom the tale of that tragic household was apparently unknown.

"Just wait a minute. I've only three more letters to post and then I'm going to have one at the little pub rahnd the corner. I'll tell you all about it there."

Hackness nodded his head and watched the little postman hasten on his duties. A triumphant smile twisted his lips and he chuckled cynically. He had forgotten, when wondering how he could make the postman talk, that human nature with its love of tittle-tattle, its yearning for drama at any cost, would settle the problem

immediately, without much probing on his part.

A few minutes later, in the grateful warmth of "the little pub rahnd the corner," Bill Jenkins, becoming at every moment more loquacious and indiscreet, treated Hackness to a graphic account of the strange and dreadful happenings which had led to the rapid departure of a certain Betty Adams from number six Shadwell Gardens six months before.

"'Er sister-in-law one day, 'er fiancé, the surgeon wot did the h'operation that night, and 'er brother the next day."

Bill Jenkins paused and stared dramatically at Hackness, who was unostentatiously replenishing his glass.

"Now wot d'you think of that? Seems very shady to me. Nobody never got to the bottom of the case, nobody never does get to the bottom of cases like that, but . . ." he lowered his voice and leant nearer to Hackness, "you mark my words, that young lady, Miss Betty Adams, she knows all right . . . there's something she's 'iding up 'er sleeve, you mark my words."

Suddenly a frown of embarrassment clouded his face.

"I'm sure I begs your pardon, sir," he stammered awkwardly, "I 'ad forgotten . . . I suppose she's a friend of yours?"

"Oh, no, that's all right," laughed Hackness, "just an acquaintance. I knew her brother better, poor fellow. Well . . . was there an inquest?"

"Yes, but it was all hushed up and the young lady vanished."

There was a long pause; then Hackness spoke thoughtfully:

"What makes you think she was hiding something up her sleeve? Wasn't it all quite clear? You say the surgeon messed up the operation, the wife died, he committed suicide and Adams died of heart failure the following day. It's really very simple, though perfectly ghastly, of course. But . . . what could she have been hiding?"

Bill Jenkins cast a glance round the bar and after taking another sip from his glass which, owing to Hackness's surreptitious replenishings, was always miraculously full no matter how much he drank, he leant nearer the Inspector and spoke softly:

"It's my belief there was more in this case than came out; it's my belief the girl had a lot to do with it, and . . . Nigel Blake."

"*Nigel Blake*—who the devil is he?"

Hackness nearly jumped out of his chair with surprise. Had he stumbled on something at last, discovered some weapon with which to strike deep at the safety of the luckless Betty? If so these last two days would not be fruitless. With infinite patience and unremitting toil he had been carefully seeking someone in the little town of Woking; someone who might throw a new light on Betty's past; who might supply him with fresh details with which to conjure up a mode of invulner-

able attack. His heart beat fast and with an evil light gleaming in his eyes he waited motionless for the postman to continue.

Bill Jenkins, delighted at having aroused such interest, paused a moment before replying and cast another hurried glance round the bar. It was obvious he was not anxious that their conversation should be overheard. Moving his chair nearer to that of Hackness he spoke softly, his voice very deliberate and clear.

"I've never told nobody about this before, but, as you was inquiring after the young lady and was a friend of 'er brother's I don't see no reason why I should 'old anythink back from you!"

"No, no," put in Hackness quickly, "it's right I should know."

"That's it, sir," the postman brightened visibly, "it's right you should know. Well, I believe this Nigel Blake was this girl's sweetheart."

"Her sweetheart?" Hackness, surprised, cried quickly, "but how could he be? You said she was engaged to this surgeon who committed suicide."

"Yes, yes, she was, but . . . she'd been going out with the other fellow long before that and he used to write to 'er, reams and reams. At one time I used to cart up a letter to 'er from 'im every day."

"But how did you know it was from him?"

It was a rather delicate question to put, but Hackness could not allow motives of tact to prove a hindrance.

A slight flush tinged the little postman's cheek and he looked a trifle confused.

"I . . . I caught sight of the name on a postcard, 'Nigel Blake'—sent to 'er brother, and all these letters were in the same writing."

"I see . . . and do you know if she ever wrote to him?"

Bill Jenkins smiled.

"Oh, yes. She used to give me letters to post for 'er sometimes an' I couldn't 'elp noticing the address—'Nigel Blake, 5, Holly Chambers, S.W.'"

Under his apparent calm the man opposite was seething with triumphant excitement. What stupendous luck to have chanced on this postman! What marvellous good fortune! His face, however, showed nothing of his inward excitement or of the fact that the address—"5, Holly Chambers, S.W."—was being carefully inscribed on a mental slate, for he feared it might cause the other's well of indiscreet information to dry up suddenly were he to jot the address down in his notebook.

"And . . . and why do you think this Nigel Blake had anything to do with the tragedy?"

Hackness put the question casually, his shrewd glance watching the postman for any signs of apprehension. But Bill Jenkins

merely drained his glass again and cast another searching look at the other occupants of the bar. No one was watching them; they were as private as it was possible to be in a public room. Lowering his voice still more and leaning ever closer to the excited Inspector, Bill Jenkins whispered dramatically:

"Because . . . I saw him there on the day the wife died!"

Hackness took a long breath.

"You saw him . . .?"

The postman nodded.

"I knew 'im by sight well. 'E used to put up at this inn sometimes. A tall 'andsome fellow, but foreign lookin' . . . an' 'e was there the day the wife died, although this Miss Betty Adams was engaged to the surgeon. You mark my words, there's something fishy about the whole thing. That Miss Betty's as deep as the sea, she is, and she an' this foreign lookin' bloke know a deal more about this nasty business at six Shadwell Gardens than wot they gave out. You mark my words."

He nodded his head repeatedly with drunken importance and took another long draught from his never-empty glass.

Hackness stared before him, thinking rapidly. He must find out everything this indiscreet little postman could tell him now, at once. To reopen the subject at some later time might make the man suspect he was being pumped; but now no question would seem too inquisitive; he must glean all he could while the beer was

clouding the other's brain to the most elementary caution.

"And these letters . . . did she still receive them when she was engaged to the surgeon?"

"No," the postman shook his head vigorously, "no, I must say she played fair there. The last letter I brought in 'is 'andwriting was addressed to 'er brother and that was a good time ago. No, I can't say she did . . . I can't say she did."

Bill Jenkins continued to shake his head vigorously and Hackness realized that he had done his work too well. The liquor was gaining the upper hand and he could not expect to obtain any further information from this source. But he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, and after a few more minutes he rose lightly to his feet, slipped a note between the postman's now nerveless fingers and with a cheery farewell walked briskly out into the rain-drenched streets, already lit with flickering lights. His step was light, his heart glowing with joy at this unexpected solution to his two days' search. Stopping a moment under one of the street lamps he removed a notebook and pencil from his pocket and carefully jotted down on a blank page—"Nigel Blake, 5, Holly Chambers, S.W."

Whistling a popular air, a most unusual occurrence for so sedate an individual, James Hackness walked quickly towards the station and a few minutes later had taken a ticket for London. The next step in his scheme of revenge lay in the great metropolis, and he

glanced anxiously at his watch to see whether it would be too late to pursue his enquiries in the vicinity of Holly Chambers that same evening. He smiled happily as he realized that the night was still young, and selecting a seat on the platform he sat down, notebook in hand, and employed the time before his train arrived in carefully setting down every detail of the postman's information.

That worthy individual was now sleeping peacefully in the warm bar of The Stag At Bay, ignorant alike as to the passing of time or, and this was still more important, the fact that he had neglected to report at the post office on completing his day's work. A dreary morrow lay before him, but in the meanwhile his dreams were rosy, his soul utterly unfearing and content.

4

"But, Betty darling, we must settle it some time soon! When are we going to get married?"

"Oh, Alan, my dear! I'm terrified to fix a date! Can you understand that I'm afraid of all this happiness? Sometimes, when I look back on the ghastly months that have passed since . . . since that night on which I came to see you . . . and then think of my happiness, I can't believe that the whole present is not a dream—a wonderful dream it is true—but a dream from which there will be a rude awakening.

Let's continue as we are for just a little . . I am so happy ! "

The man slipped his arm round her slender shoulders.

" Betty . . . there's nothing more to fear ! " He laughed. " So . . . you'll tell me to-morrow ? "

The girl smiled to the man. In spite of her words, there was a faith which belied them in her eyes.

5

Big Ben's sonorous voice was tolling forth ten chimes when James Hackness, looking rather wet and bedraggled, paused at the corner of Graeme Street, before turning into Holly Chambers which led from it. It was a very small street, ill-lit and strangely suggestive of a certain atmosphere of mystery and stealth which hangs about many London streets, but more especially those which border on Whitechapel. This cul-de-sac—for such it was—seemed to have caught this somewhat vicious air of secrecy and, hardened police officer though he was, Hackness halted a moment before proceeding on his quest.

This in itself was sufficiently delicate, sufficiently ticklish to daunt a man of even stronger nerve, and for a moment or two he deliberated whether perhaps it would not be better to defer his visit until the following

morning, ten o'clock being a somewhat unusual hour at which to force oneself upon the society of a total stranger. But there is no passion so strong as that of revenge, no one so reckless as a jealous man; and with an impatient shrug of his shoulders the Inspector hastened down the street in search of number five.

The buildings were ranged on one side of the road only—a wooden fence boarding the other—and appeared to consist of a block of flats with a communal garden and drive. Hackness pushed open a large iron gate and walked cautiously towards a lighted window. A notice on the door stating "FLATS 20—30" caused him to pass it by quickly and pause at a door next but one, which announced "FLATS 1—10." He walked softly up and was about to climb the very much begrimed steps of approach when the sudden opening of the front door caused him to dart back into the shadows of an immense privet hedge which bordered the drive. From this point of vantage he was able to watch without himself being seen, and in another second a rather florid looking wearer of a much battered opera hat stepped gingerly down the drive and, in a blurred thick voice, urged his companion to hurry.

It was his companion on whom Hackness's attention was fixed. Slim, pretty in rather a garish way, this young woman belonged to an unmistakable type, and the Inspector needed no further assurance that the building into which

he was about to force an entrance did not cater for the respectable. So this was the place which harboured the man to whom Betty had written such numerous letters; the man whose love she had not proudly spurned . . . as she had his. An ugly sneer twisted his lips. He waited until the man and his loudly-dressed companion had swung open the gate and emerged into the street, then crept softly out from his hiding place and walked quickly up the steps.

To his surprise the door was still ajar, and pushing it open he slipped through into a dimly lit hall. A dilapidated wall paper discoloured the walls, the carpet was threadbare and cheap, the atmosphere one of decay and corruption. It was as Hackness had thought; this was no place in which a respectable citizen would wish to be housed. Whoever Nigel Blake was, his tastes were not commendable. The thought pleased Hackness intensely; the work he had in hand could best be done by a man whose ideas of right would not blind him to material advantage—and surely only such a man would choose this place to dwell in.

Drawing a deep breath the Inspector approached a door to his right on which a number was indistinctly printed. A closer scrutiny revealed the fact that number one flat lay to that side. He examined the door opposite; it was number two. A sudden noise made him start in alarm, a noise as of some machinery

working. A second later he saw a lift descending at the end of the corridor facing him, and realized that were he to escape the unwelcome attentions of the man who controlled it he must remove himself from the hall immediately.

His heart beating excitedly, he tiptoed up the stairs, on which a shoddy carpet scarcely concealed the bare boards. Arrived at the second floor he scanned the doors there and—as he had assumed—found them to be numbered three and four. His objective must lie on the third floor. He turned to the stairs and slowly ascended until he had reached the next flight and was facing a door on which the figure five was clearly visible. The door was of glass through which a bright light was shining—welcome proof that the flat was occupied.

Hackness paused a moment to regain his breath. The climb had been pretty severe and he must be in full command of his energies when encountering this Nigel Blake. Again the thought struck him that perhaps it was too late, that he had better rest content with having discovered this man's lair that evening and pay him a visit the next day, but a fleeting memory of the look on Betty's face as she stared wide-eyed at Fergusson banished all sense of caution and urged him towards his vengeance.

Stepping towards the door he pressed his fingers firmly on the bell and awaited developments. Ten seconds passed . . . twenty . . . .

a minute, but nothing happened. No sounds came to him from behind that lighted door, and with a sense of disappointment it occurred to Hackness that perhaps no one was in, that the light might have been left burning in error. A frown of annoyance darkened his face. Again his fingers pressed the bell, but more urgently this time, and he waited anxiously. Five seconds passed, and then rapid steps approached the door; it was flung open and Hackness had a vague impression of a tall, dark, swarthy-faced man standing in the doorway regarding him with a scowl of grave displeasure. The Inspector had no time in which to note more than the other's general appearance, but it was enough to confirm the slight description given him by the postman, and he realized that the man confronting him could be none other than Betty's one-time lover—Nigel Blake.

Summoning a courteous smile to his lips, a smile which conveyed a subtle apology for the lateness of his visit, Hackness murmured:

"Mr. Nigel Blake?"

The man stared at him unsmilingly.

"Speaking," he answered curtly.

"I'm sorry to intrude at such an hour, Mr. Blake," went on Hackness quickly, "but . . . may I have a word with you? It's a matter of some importance."

There was a certain quality in the Inspector's voice which compelled respect; a hint of authority which banished the other's churlishness. The scowl vanished from his face and he looked

searchingly at Hackness, his eyes wary and cunning. Suddenly he cast a quick glance behind him, a curious glance which the Inspector did not fail to note, and after hesitating a moment he said abruptly:

"It's not very convenient at this hour. Will you make an appointment for to-morrow?"

Hackness was about to reply, to deny the possibility of deferring the interview until the next day, when a woman's voice called huskily from the inner room:

"Nigel, Nigel, what are you doing?"

The effect on Hackness was astounding. The voice was unpleasant, drunken and debased, but it was not this which startled him. He had heard it before; at some time in his life that voice had held a certain significance for him, a significance which had no relation to wholesome things—of that he was certain—but for the life of him James Hackness could not remember when or where he had last heard it.

On Nigel Blake also the voice had its effect. He flushed slightly and called over his shoulder:

"All right. I'll be back in a minute."

He turned again to Hackness, a cynical smile playing about his lips and remarked blatantly:

"You see . . . it's not convenient at the moment."

With some difficulty the Inspector resisted an answering smile. So he had not been wrong. *This* was the sort of man on whom Betty had looked with favour: his lips curled

derisively at the thought. What queer creatures women were, to be sure!—but anyway this was definitely the right type for his purpose. He looked up imperturbably at the man before him.

"Very well." His voice was cool and business-like. "What about ten o'clock to-morrow morning?"

For a long moment Nigel Blake was silent. His eyes, cunning and shifty, roved searchingly over the Inspector's face and person. He seemed to be seeking some clue as to the reason for this nocturnal visit, this man's imperative demand for an interview. At last he spoke and his voice was a little strained, as though he were striving to conceal an underlying fear.

"Would you mind telling me your name . . . your business?"

The tone in which the question was put made it sound rude and churlish. Hackness waited a moment before replying. What he should answer to such an enquiry had been occupying his brain for some time; even now he could not decide on the best way in which to approach this man. The essential thing was that his answer should not cause Blake to fly into hiding. Were he to give his own name and reveal the fact that he was an officer of the law might it not have this very effect? There must be many ways in which a man of this type might fear the law. What more likely than that when he called on the next day the bird would have flown?

Hackness's brow furrowed with anxiety: were he not to reveal his own name, what possible excuse could he give for his late call that night, what possible reason for the interview on the morrow? Intimate that it had something to do with Betty Adams? He rejected the idea instantly. He must not bring her name into it quite so soon. These thoughts, with which he had been struggling for some time prior to his arrival at the house, flashed through his mind again. For a few moments all was a chaos of fears and doubts, but then he brushed his hesitation aside, decided he must take the risk and, turning to Blake, said calmly:

"I am Detective-Inspector Hackness of Scotland Yard."

He was watching the other closely for any sign of alarm and was not disappointed. A certain tightening of the lips, a steely glint in the eyes, a sudden pallor, showed only too clearly that the announcement of Hackness's profession had had an effect far more momentous than such a disclosure should naturally cause. A certain surprise, a certain alarm at the fact that a strange visitor at night was none other than a police Inspector, was to be expected, but not this undoubted panic, this consternation and dismay, which Nigel Blake sought so unsuccessfully to hide.

At last the man seemed to take a grip on himself. His shifty eyes held the Inspector's defiantly for a second, and he said rather breathlessly:

"Very well, Inspector; ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Right. Good-bye, Mr. Blake."

"Good night, Inspector."

Hackness turned on his heel and had one foot on the stairs when suddenly he heard again that curiously unpleasant, husky voice; that voice which seemed to come to him out of the mists of years, to take him back to some episode in his life which evaded memory, but which, he felt so certain, carried with it an element of vice, of lawlessness.

"Nigel, who the devil is it? Come here."

He paused a moment racking his brain to trace the reason for its familiarity, waiting to catch any other words the woman might say, words which might lead him to a clue, but a second later the door of number five was slammed to and Hackness realized he could expect no further enlightenment that night.

His mind whirling with a multitude of thoughts he moved lightly down the stairs, into the badly lit hall, through the front door which was still ajar as he had left it, and out into the fresh air of the street.

6

James Hackness left the building with a worried frown on his face. Where had he

heard that voice before, those curious tones which had at once awakened a corresponding chord in his memory?

He stopped outside the entrance and leant against the wall, perplexed, deep in thought. Instinctively he felt that he was near to something of importance, near to a discovery which might be of the utmost use to him if only he could get his memory to work. There was something in that female voice calling impatiently to the man Nigel Blake from the sitting-room within his flat which could give Hackness possibly useful information if only he could put his finger on it.

So deep in thought was he, so occupied with this problem which seemed to be on the verge of escaping from him and which, he felt, was of such great importance, that he failed to notice the curious glances of the occasional passers-by. That he provoked interest he did not realize: he realized nothing but that he might be on the brink of a discovery and that his memory would not help him to unravel it. Impatiently he looked up.

A girl passed slowly. Subconsciously Hackness noticed her, noticed her over-rouged cheeks, her scarlet lips, the seductive figure clad to show it off as nearly as was possible according to her form, and the inviting glance which she gave him as she passed. She actually paused opposite him for a moment, paused just long enough for him to speak if the spirit so inspired him.

It was then that Hackness noticed her clothes by the aid of a street lamp. A blue coat and skirt, cut to the figure of a dummy model but close enough to its living wearer to be suggestive: a small black hat with a scarlet ornament: grey silk stockings and black patent leather shoes.

A blue coat and skirt: a small black hat with a scarlet ornament: "*Nigel, Nigel, what are you doing?*"

"Gosh!" said Hackness to himself.

He looked up at the girl's face. She was smiling openly now, smiling the professional smile of victory. He laughed at her suddenly.

"No good, little girl!" He laughed again, and acting on an impulse quickly withdrew a note from his pocket. "Here! Take this: you've been useful to me. And clear out quick!"

The girl, astonishment in her eyes, took the proffered note, gaped at him for a moment, and then abruptly disappeared into the night. Hackness laughed again, a laugh of triumph rather than of mirth.

"So you're back again, Estelle! The States too hot for you, perhaps! But I thought—mind you, I only *thought*—that there was a deportation order against you." He laughed to himself again, gleefully this time. "I can soon find out, however. And you're *not* going to wriggle out this time!"

Suddenly the man of action again, Hackness

turned to the entrance once more, but this time he approached it openly. He went up to the porter standing by the lift.

"I want to telephone, please."

The man looked at him in surprise.

"Oh, do yer? There's a public telephone down the street. What's the matter? Ain't got no pennies?"

Hackness had one look at the man. It might have been better to have kept his identity a secret, but he was in a hurry now and it could not be helped. He spoke rapidly and with each word the porter subsided visibly. In a very few minutes Hackness was speaking on the telephone to Scotland Yard.

Shortly afterwards Hackness returned to the entrance hall and sat down on an unobtrusive seat. He took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lighted one, inhaling with pleasure. He felt at ease, pleased with the world for the first time for some days. Things, at long last, seemed to be turning his way, and subconsciously he compared himself to an Atlantic liner which has suffered a severe buffeting on its voyage, but which has at last reached the comparatively sheltered waters of the last lap. There was plenty to do still, a lot to do, but it was very much in the nature of routine work: he had succeeded since his return to England far beyond the limit even of his imagination.

His thoughts were interrupted suddenly by the arrival of two men from the street. Hackness

at once rose to his feet and talked to these new arrivals for a few moments: he then left the building quickly and went straight to a car which was drawn up at the kerb. He entered this and even as he did so the driver let in the clutch and the car moved silently forward.

Arrived at Scotland Yard, Hackness lost no time in finding the inspector on duty.

"Hullo, Hacker! Curtailed your leave? I thought you were in Switzerland."

"So I was."

"Didn't you like it? Too much snow?"

Hackness laughed dryly.

"Too cold for me," he said.

"What's this I hear?" His companion spoke interestedly. "Have you found the beautiful Estelle?"

"Not sure," said Hackness. "Have a hunch I've heard her voice, that's all. But there's an order for deportation against her, isn't there?"

"Sure thing. She's forbidden these shores."

"Right. I want to look at her history before I act. And I also want to see what we know of a certain gentleman calling himself Nigel Blake."

His fellow inspector looked at Hackness admiringly.

"Haven't been long getting into harness since you got back, have you?"

"No," said Hackness shortly, "and I can't be long either. Coming?"

The other nodded. Together they left the

room and went in search of the information which Hackness required.

About Nigel Blake they could find nothing derogatory. He had managed to escape the official eye of displeasure even if he had not always led a life of virtue. But the *dossier* of Estelle Birkett was both voluminous and interesting, at times almost lurid. Hackness was not longer than a quarter of an hour at Scotland Yard, but in that short time he had learnt enough to enable him to make up his mind. The same car which had brought him took him back to the block of flats at record speed. But all the time he scarcely looked out of the windows of the tonneau at the houses flying past, so engrossed was he in a typewritten sheet which he had taken with him from the Yard. On it were described all the complaints which had recently been laid before the police of the West-end of London, and Detective-Inspector Hackness was trying to find a certain type of crime. Old criminals rarely alter their methods even after an enforced holiday running into years.

Suddenly Hackness gave an abrupt grunt of satisfaction.

7

Hackness found only one of the two men whom he had left, when again he entered number five, Holly Chambers. This man came forward

to him and made his report in a few words. Apparently Nigel Blake had left the flat very soon after Hackness had departed, and, according to the instructions given to them by Hackness before his visit to Scotland Yard, the detective's companion had at once followed Blake so that he should not be lost sight of.

"What about the woman?" asked Hackness.

"She never came out, sir. Still upstairs in the flat, I should think."

"I hope so," said Hackness dryly, and he went straight to the lift.

In a few moments he was once again standing outside that flat and he paused a second to reflect how different were his emotions now to what they had been in the same place such a very short time ago. Before he had been doubtful, wondering what to do. Now he knew. He felt that luck had at last changed and that he was about to discover something of the utmost importance in the whole plan of restoring his self-esteem. Abruptly dismissing these thoughts as a waste of time, he rang the bell and was not surprised that no answer was forthcoming. He rang again, long and imperatively, and was rewarded by hearing footsteps approaching the door and the key turning in the lock. A moment later and the door still on its chain was opened only very slightly, but through the crack Hackness's quick eye had seen all that he wanted.

"Evening, Estelle," he said brightly. "Here's an old friend come to see you."

No answer came from the other side of the door, but Hackness laughed, for he had caught the malevolent gleam in the one eye which he could see regarding him.

"Game's up, Estelle," he said firmly. "You had better open. I want to have a chat with you . . . and no tricks, mind. There's a man outside, one of my own men, who's got definite orders, so don't you go playing the fool."

"It's Inspector Hackness, isn't it?"

Hackness laughed.

"How formal we are! You used to call me—'that blasted Hacker'—as far as I remember. You never resented me calling you Estelle, did you, Miss Birkett? Come along, open up. I haven't got all night to waste."

Evidently making up her mind that there was no use in further delay she slipped the chain and opened the door wide.

A voluptuous looking woman stood on the threshold. Dissipation, perhaps even more than the passage of years—although youth had passed her by long ago—lent to her face an unpleasant air of premature age. Rouge, badly adjusted, eyebrows heavily pencilled, hair whose tint owed nothing to nature, helped to destroy her remaining claims to loveliness, but in spite of all . . . here was a woman whose beauty must once have been superb, and faint traces of it lingered yet. The expression, however, was evil, must always have been evil, and Hackness felt only the same deep repulsion

which years before he had felt also when in her company.

He advanced through the door and the woman shut it behind him.

"Where shall we go for our little chat?" he asked.

She passed him and opened a door which led to the sitting-room of the flat. Hackness followed her into the room and saw her sit down in an armchair by the fireplace. There was a similar chair opposite and she pointed to it. Hackness sank into the proffered seat and took out his cigarettes. An offer of one to the woman was refused, but he did not ask permission to smoke himself. He merely placed a cigarette between his lips and lighted it without speaking, then leaning back and looking at her through the haze of smoke, he suddenly jerked out a question:

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"I don't get you?"

"Oh, yes, you do, Estelle. Answer me now—what's the idea, and how did you get in?"

"That's nothing to do with you."

"Isn't it? I wonder. It's my business to find out, you know, so that the method used by you can be stopped up and other undesirables prevented from entering the country. Yes, Estelle, did you hear what I said? Other undesirables."

"You were always rude, Hacker."

Hackness laughed.

"I believe I learnt that from you," he said.

"Anyway we've usually understood each other. Let me have a straight answer please, Estelle. How did you get in?"

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I see. All right, I'll find out some other way. You've got a nerve, you know, coming back like this and then proceeding immediately to put into practice precisely the same sort of jobs you used to do. That's what I don't understand about you people. You don't seem to have any originality. Whenever you commit a crime your idea is to sign it with your autograph."

Watching her closely Hackness noticed that the woman flushed with anger. He smiled to himself grimly. There was a purpose behind his taunts, a purpose which seemed to be on the verge of success. He wanted to loosen her tongue. He knew how difficult it was, from old acquaintance with the nefarious history of the woman sitting before him, and from personal contact with her, since he had been chiefly instrumental in getting her convicted and deported, after serving her sentence, five years before.

"I should have thought," he went on, "that it would have been very much more sensible, as soon as you had managed to get back into the country, to start on some new line, not the old stuff of preying on a man and having your 'husband' walk in on you both. It cost old . . . well, let's be discreet, that old Member of Parliament no less than five hundred to get away from your clutches last time, didn't

it, but . . . er, tell me, Estelle, I notice you've changed your 'husband.' What's happened to old Samuel?"

"What the devil d'you mean?"

The words seemed to come from her lips grudgingly as if she intended Hackness to continue his monologue without any attempt on her part to turn it into a conversation.

"Only this," said Hackness, leaning forward abruptly, "only this, Estelle Birkett, that last night you were up to the same old game, that last night you picked up a fellow in the streets, a fellow who looked wealthy, took him off to a flat in which Blake was waiting suitably concealed, and when you got the poor boob just where you wanted him, in walks Blake and plays the part of the outraged husband. Yes, yes," he held up his hand to prevent her bursting into indignant speech, "yes, yes, I know you were hundreds of miles away, possibly you hadn't got into the country yet, but it won't do, Estelle. There's just that lack of originality which I was deploring in you a short time ago. That's exactly the same game that you used to do before. No good telling me where you were last night, because I know. You might just as well have signed your name on your victim's underclothes . . ."

"Damn you, Hackness."

The woman had changed now. All signs of fading beauty had left her face. It was distorted with passion and Hackness involuntarily recoiled. She reminded him of nothing so much as a wild

beast at bay, but determined to sell its life dearly.

"Why can't you keep your prying nose to things that concern you. Why can't you leave a poor girl alone?"

"Good Lord!" Hackness broke in lightly, "descending to the sob stuff? I thought better of you, Estelle! You never did that sort of thing the last time I met you. It's my business to know what you are doing once you come back to a place you are not wanted in. What happened? America too hot for you?"

"Oh, get away. You'll have a job branding this business on to me."

"I don't think I will," said Hackness quietly. "Since you left the country there's a new law about blackmail, you know. The man who prosecutes doesn't necessarily have to have his name given in open court, so we get many more ready to prosecute than we used to, thank God! You should have made yourself acquainted with all these new regulations before you came back, Estelle. I think you must have gone off a lot. You were very much more thorough in the old days."

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

She snarled the words rather than spoke them. Hackness smiled.

"What do you think? Put you into gaol, of course, and you'll take your trial. You'll get a longer stretch from the judge this time, and then you'll go out to where you have come from and you'll stay there. By the way"—he put

his question lightly, looking at his finger tips as he spoke—"where did you pick up this new 'husband' of yours?"

"Nigel?"

"Yes, Nigel?"

"I knew him long ago."

"Before you went away, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Did you work with him in the old days? I don't seem to remember him."

"That's for you to find out, Mr. Detective. You may be right that I'm not so clever as I used to be but, by God, I don't squeal on friends yet."

"Quite right," said Hackness, quietly, "it's a nasty thing to do, isn't it? Almost as bad as blackmailing."

He laughed, then abruptly rose to his feet.

"By the way, where is this man Blake now?"

"He went," said the woman contemptuously; "he wouldn't believe me when I told him that you suspected nothing of my presence, that you wouldn't be back until ten in the morning."

"You seem to forget that I've got a good memory," said Hackness, with a laugh. "I heard your voice, you know."

"So that's why you came back?"

"Yes, that's why I came back. No, you're not so thorough as you used to be, nothing like it. Where did he go?"

Hackness shot the last question out at her suddenly from the cover of his other words

spoken evenly, but the woman only laughed at him.

"Find out," she said.

At that very moment there came a knock on the door. Hackness looked up quickly.

"Stay where you are," he said to her in a low voice, but then aloud: "Come in."

The detective whom he had left on guard outside entered the room.

"Excuse me, sir. It's about the man Blake, sir."

"Yes?"

"News just come through, sir; he's been arrested boarding the train for Southampton."

Hackness turned to the woman and smiled. There was triumph gleaming in his eyes.

"Shall we be getting along?" he asked pleasantly.

For a moment Hackness thought she would lose all control and attack him, but although the thought probably was not very far from her mind she pulled herself together with an effort.

"Just give me a minute to get my hat?"

Hackness laughed.

"I'm not a tenderfoot," he said quietly, "and I don't think you were susceptible to colds in the head. Anything you want will be brought to you afterwards. Come along, dearie."

He held open the door for her and preceded her to the lift, his assistant bringing up the rear of the little procession.

Two minutes later the car which had been

waiting outside was now on its way to a police station. Hackness sat in the back seat of a taxi hastening to Scotland Yard, triumph apparent in his very attitude.

8

Hackness had his first interview with Nigel Blake on the following morning. It was short, sharp and decisive.

"So you are Estelle Birkett's new 'husband,' are you?" the Inspector started.

Blake, at first cool, was giving nothing away.

"New husband?" he laughed. "What an idea! I've known the girl for a long time—in America, but we've certainly never been married."

"Quite right," said Hackness shortly, "except for the purposes of blackmail. Blackmail is a serious offence, my lad. You're going to be put away for some years—and no one will be sorry."

Blake flushed with anger.

"What the devil d'you mean, Inspector?"

"It's no good denying it," said Hackness. "As a matter of fact he's going along to the station now and there'll be another charge preferred against you too."

"Oh," said Blake, "what's that?"

"Harbouring a person forbidden the country, that's all. Quite serious enough without anything else."

"Yes," said Blake slowly, "of course that was misguided friendship. I suppose I should have found out about her, but I never knew her history, you see. I had just met her in America as a friend, and when she came to me two or three nights ago and asked if I could put her up, well . . . I didn't see why not."

"Beautiful innocent boy," Hackness laughed sarcastically, "well, if you can get away with that story I'll shake hands with you. It doesn't look well, you know, from your point of view, taking the night train for a well-known port, from which you could leave the country. Looks rather like running away from something. You'll have to explain that as well, you know."

"I lost my head," said Blake. "I've got nothing on my conscience, but I'm not usually visited by detective inspectors late at night."

"And more's the pity," said Hackness quickly. "We might have prevented some poor devil a whole lot of mental worry if we'd got you earlier. You wouldn't like to make a clean breast of it, would you? It'll save trouble and expense, and it might save you a bit off the sentence if you are wise and honest for a change."

Blake got up angrily.

"Look here, Inspector, I may be at your mercy at the moment, but I'm damned if I'm going to be bullied like this. I tell you I'm perfectly innocent. I've got nothing on my mind."

"Glad to hear it," said Hackness dryly.

"Must be wonderful not being troubled with a conscience."

He got up and left the cell quickly. There was a smile on his face as he went out of the police station. He was pleased with the interview because he felt that it had achieved his object. All that he had wanted was to paint a rather lurid picture of Nigel Blake's immediate future to him in order that he might brood over what had been said in the enforced leisure of the moment and possibly be in a more suitable frame of mind for the second interview, which Hackness had planned to take place that afternoon. At the thought of this second meeting Hackness frowned for a moment. So much depended on it from his point of view, so much depended on Nigel Blake coming over and forming an unknowing ally in the plans which he had formulated. But he was fairly confident of success. He had brought the man's future prospects to the forefront of his mind so that he was bound to consider them in the intervening hours before Hackness again saw him, and this would bring him into the mood which the Inspector wanted. If a thing is thought over too long it always magnifies.

In order to fill in the time which must elapse for the furtherance of his scheme Hackness paid a visit to his other prisoner of the previous evening, but, much as he tried, he could get nothing out of Estelle Birkett. Beyond the fact that she confirmed having met Nigel Blake in America, he could get no information from

her. Whether they had been partners in similar blackmailing episodes in America and had made the place too hot for them he was not able to discover, but he knew that he had only to refer to the Criminal Investigation Department of New York to learn all that was known of their histories.

Hackness returned to the Yard after this second visit and found a message waiting for him to interview the Commissioner.

He left his superior's room, half an hour later, highly pleased with himself. The Commissioner had expressed appreciation of the smart way in which the arrests had been made on the previous night and had complimented Hackness on his memory for voices. He even hinted at possible promotion in the near future. It was a buttery interview from superior to subordinate in order to encourage him a little: this was the Commissioner's way and it paid only too well, as Hackness knew from his own feelings at the moment. Still it was pleasant that it had happened; it was something upon which to look back with pride. He was also given complete charge of the investigation necessary before a case could be brought against the man and woman, and this in itself was promotion of an indirect kind, for never before had he been given entire control.

He went to an exclusive restaurant and lunched himself well. All the time he kept humming to himself an old tune which was

haunting his mind. "*Looking at the World Through Rose-coloured Glasses*"—that was just what he felt like himself. Everything was coming his way. Professional success, recognition of his ability by those in the seats of the mighty, and—which delighted him secretly to a far greater degree—the knowledge that while reaping laurels and golden opinions he was also gratifying his own personal ends, and furthering the process of his scheme of vengeance. Deep in that part of his being which some call intuition, some subconsciousness, he had a vague feeling that this Nigel Blake was to provide him with a certain missing link, a missing link in a mystery—he fully realized he had never completely solved it—the mysterious death of Jarvis Webb. When that link was discovered he felt sure that it would be of a startling nature, a nature which perhaps might give him a useful handle, if his knowledge was skilfully employed.

It was in high spirits that Hackness returned that afternoon to the police station which harboured Nigel Blake. Once more he went down to the cell, once more he sat down on the bed and for a few moments regarded his victim silently. He was trying to see whether anything in the man's demeanour betrayed the effect of their interview that morning. Nigel Blake stared imperturbably at him, a satirical grin curling his lips, and the Inspector's heart sank. This was a tougher case than he had bargained for. His eyes, grim and unwavering, probed

the other's unmercifully, seeking the smallest flicker of alarm . . . but there was none. And then Hackness caught sight of Blake's hands. The iron control he was imposing on his face did not extend to them and the Inspector smiled inwardly as he noticed their restless movements and the nervous writhing of the fingers. So Mr. Nigel Blake was not as cool as he appeared. So much the better.

"Well," said Hackness at last, "I've come to you, Blake, in a different spirit to that in which I came this morning."

The man sat waiting and there was a short pause during which Hackness never removed his eyes from the other's face.

"I've heard something, two or three things in fact, which lead me to suppose, Blake, that you may be useful to us, to the police. If you are disposed to help us in this matter it's possible, mark you I'm making no promise, but I say it is possible that that prosecutor I was talking about this morning may be induced either to change his charge or possibly to drop it altogether.

"What about Estelle?" asked Blake, a crafty gleam coming into his eyes.

Hackness smiled grimly.

"As far as she is concerned . . . if no formal charge comes up against you, naturally it won't come up against her, but she'll leave the country pretty quick, you needn't worry about that, and she'll have to stand for the consequences of breaking into the country when

she was forbidden to do so after being deported. However, in a sense that is not very serious. She'll just get turned out again. Let me repeat, Blake, that blackmail is a very grave charge indeed and the judges nowadays, and very rightly, are giving the maximum penalty whenever they are able . . . so . . . well, if you can help I am only suggesting it might be a useful thing to do."

"Go on," said Blake, but there was an eager look on his face, an expression which seemed to denote that he was anxious to do all that he could to avoid the consequences of a blackmail charge against him.

"Well, some time ago," began Hackness quietly, but all the time he was speaking he watched intently for any sign the other might betray, "some time ago a well-known surgeon was killed. I say killed advisedly. He was murdered, although people connected with the case combined to make it appear that he had committed suicide. I believe that you knew that man?"

"Jarvis Webb?"

The name came out quickly, almost involuntarily.

"Jarvis Webb was the surgeon's name. I'm glad to see that you knew him. There were others connected with the case, which was very obscure from start to finish. It's doubtful, however, whether we should ever have got at the real truth of the matter, although we should certainly have got a conviction."

"Conviction for murder?"

"Yes."

"Well, why didn't you?" Blake was becoming more at his ease. "I never quite understood why I never heard anything more about that after the seven days' wonder of the man's death in the evening newspapers."

"Let me help your memory. If you read your papers carefully you may have noticed that in some out-of-the-way corner of the paper, but in the same edition which had headlines about Jarvis Webb, it was reported that a man unknown had died in St. Timothy's Hospital. It was assumed that he had had an accident of some sort, as far as I can remember."

"An accident? Not an accident!"

"Oh, so you did notice it?"

"You are talking of Robert Adams, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Wasn't it an accident? I thought it was."

"Oh, no." Blake smiled. "He died, as far as I remember—and I think I am right, Inspector—from a fit. A form of disease to which he was susceptible when very excited. I believe it was the result of some wound in the war."

"Was it? I didn't realize that. Anyway he died and you were asking me a minute ago why we haven't got a conviction. That was why. Can't convict a dead man."

Blake laughed.

"How true," he said.

Hackness looked at him sharply. The man was smiling. There had been something underlying those two words which he had spoken, something which the Inspector would have given a lot to understand.

"What do you mean—how true?"

It flashed across Hackness's mind that the words had been pronounced very sarcastically, so sarcastically in fact that, although on face value an agreement with his statement, they actually denoted quite a different opinion. But he knew the value of not hurrying his man and when he spoke his voice was even, very much out of accord with the excitement within him.

"You seem to know a lot about this case. What about just telling me the story?"

Blake looked at him sharply. A crafty gleam once more appeared in his eyes.

"What am I getting out of this?"

Hackness smiled.

"You'll have to leave that to me, my friend. But . . . er, well, the police are notoriously trustworthy, aren't they?"

"Are they . . .?"

Blake checked his words. Evidently he had been about to say something tactless, but Hackness laughed.

"You can talk plainly, I won't mind, only I suggest that we are wasting time, valuable time as far as I am concerned, and that if you will just tell me what you know about the

case straight through from the beginning, well . . . it might be helpful."

"I don't know very much," said Blake, "but it's rather a sordid story what I do know of it. I was very much in love with a girl once."

He paused.

Hackness thought of the little postman's words—'He used to write to 'er, reams and reams'—but he realized it would be wise to give no impression at the moment that he knew more than he acknowledged, and so he laughed.

"I don't want to hear your love stories," he said.

He got no further, however, for Blake turned on him with a surprising show of anger.

"I thought you asked me to tell you all I knew about it, and as this is one of the few serious things in my life I don't like being mocked."

"Sorry."

Hackness retained his smile. He knew the insincerity of the type with which he was dealing.

"Carry on. It shan't occur again."

"I was very much in love, I say, with a girl called Betty Adams. Yes, you are right, Robert Adams' sister. She turned me down and I went abroad to get over it. I found I couldn't stop thinking of her and so I came back."

"Just one minute," said Hackness. "I'm

bound to get to the real truth in this matter, Nigel Blake. Don't forget that I know a certain amount about you. Were you in love with Betty Adams or were you in love with her money?"

For a moment Blake hesitated and then he smiled.

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"I see," said Hackness, quietly. "Well, get on with it."

"I knew she wasn't married, so I came back."

"That's better," said Hackness. "Dead broke, were you?"

"I don't like to say that, but . . . er, well let's say that I hadn't got quite so much as when I started. I came back and arrived just at the psychological moment, for I found that Betty Adams was going to marry this man Webb. I had a look at him and one look was enough. I had a look at Betty and that look was enough too. She'd always been fond of me and I think I could have got her back all right if it hadn't been . . . well, for the trouble that you talked about."

"I don't quite follow where you come in there."

"I'll tell you. Mrs. Robert Adams was very ill when I got back. Webb, a friend of the family and a leading surgeon, was called in to have a look at her. He said that she would have to be operated on at once. Unfortunately when he came down the stairs he found Betty in my arms."

In his arms! Betty in the arms of this dissolute scoundrel! For a moment Hackness forgot all else in a wave of passionate anger. He stared at the man before him with hatred and loathing—but then realization of his present position came back to him. Forcing all emotion from his face he murmured curtly:

"Yes. Go on!"

"Well, that put the kybosh on it. Webb went away and he got drunk. He operated on Mrs. Adams when he was drunk. That was a regrettable thing to do, because the operation failed. Were it not for . . ."

"Not so fast," said Hackness, "how do you know all this?"

"I made it my business to know. I went and inquired at the Home. I got a stupid nursing sister to talk too much. Wonderful what you can do if you take a girl out who's not good-looking and . . . say she is!"

Blake's whole attitude repulsed Hackness, but his face betrayed no hint of this.

"I see. Carry on."

"As I say, Webb operated when he was drunk and he failed in this operation. He killed a woman in fact, but being a surgeon no doubt he could have got away with that murder, and no doubt also Robert Adams, who knew the facts as I did, decided that he would not get away with it. So he went and shot him up. I believe that Betty went with him."

"*What?*"

"I say I believe that Betty went with him. I didn't see her again. She disappeared, so I can't say this for certain."

But Hackness's quick mind was no longer hearing the words of the man before him. He was rapidly reviewing this new aspect of the affair, reviewing it with incredulous delight. Everything had played straight into his hands. Here was the missing link, the invulnerable means of attacking Betty's false security. That she had been in Webb's room on the night of the murder he did not believe for one moment. The man was lying; fabricating a mass of startling data in order to placate his listener, to buy his own freedom from the hands of the law. But that did not matter. Nothing mattered save that the man before him should be led to swear, to swear on his own initiative, that he knew she had been present on that tragic night, that he had seen her accompanying her brother. With this evidence, why, the way was clear before him. He would accuse Betty of murder, state his proof and lay before her two alternatives, exposure—which would involve arrest for murder—or marriage. No reason to fear Alan Fergusson now. No need to feel his hands bound by that incriminating document he had so foolishly signed. Arrest for murder is an odious thing, a ghastly ordeal though the accused be innocent, and Hackness felt assured that Betty's sensitive soul would shrink with horror from the prospect; that

she would go to any lengths to gain immunity. To produce that fatal pamphlet would avail her nothing, hurt him scarcely at all—for no one would be so simple, so insanely credulous as to believe him capable of marrying a woman against whom he could prove murder. He would swear the signature was a clever forgery, and none would be so foolish as to doubt it.

"Yes."

Blake's words suddenly came again to Hackness's conscious mind.

"Yes, I think if ever a man did deserve to be killed it was Jarvis Webb. Still you police officers don't believe in motives much, do you, unless you can get them to your own satisfaction from the point of view of the prosecution."

Hackness suddenly spoke.

"Look here, Blake, are you quite sure that you couldn't go into a witness box and say that Betty Adams went with her brother to Jarvis Webb's house that night?"

"Me? Of course I couldn't. I wasn't there."

"Are you quite sure you weren't there? After all, it seems quite natural that you as the lover of the girl should be interested in what had happened. That you might have been with her, anyway, for part of that evening; that she might have left you suddenly saying she was joining her brother; that you were surprised; that you let her go; that you followed her. I think all those

things would be reasonable actions, wouldn't they?"

Blake looked up quickly and stared at the Inspector. The life of a criminal does not tend to make a man slow-witted and he quickly sensed what lay behind the fluent suppositions of this strange police officer. He was about to speak, but Hackness got up quickly.

"Think it over," he said. "I'll be in later this evening."

Without another word he walked to the door and was gone.

9

From the decks of the cross-Channel steamer Betty and Alan could just discern the white cliffs of the English coast making their appearance through the mists. The girl slipped her arm through Alan's.

"It's rather wonderful getting back, isn't it?" she said, "even if you've only been away for a very short time."

"And even if you've had a marvellous holiday," said Alan quietly.

The girl looked up at his face for a moment and noticed the tender expression in his eyes.

"We're going home, Betty, home; do you realize that?"

"Oh, I know."

The gentle pressure on his arm made Alan

realize, as nothing else could have done, the sense of intimacy, of delightful companionship which had never before entered his rather lonely life.

"Everyone is glad to get home," he said quietly, "because home, after all, stands for peace and happiness. You go away for a change perhaps; throw yourself into adventures, excitements, into a thousand new sensations, but it's always the same, Betty dear, in the end the thought of peace calls you back home again. Peace!" he repeated softly, his voice giving the word an added, deep significance.

The cliffs of Dover were now in full view and the crossing of the dreaded Channel was very nearly at an end.

Alan looked down at Betty's face and noticed her wistful expression.

"Betty," he said, "think of it. Our engagement in *The Times* to-morrow. 'Will take place shortly'—very shortly, won't it? And then," he laughed, "they lived happily ever afterwards."

Once again there came that gentle pressure on his arm.

10

It was after dark before Hackness returned to the cell in which Nigel Blake was detained. The prisoner had his first intimation that he

was being visited when he heard the key turn in the lock and Hackness entered alone. Blake was sitting on his bed and he did not rise when the Inspector came in, a fact of which Hackness was quick to grasp the significance. But the Inspector only smiled: he knew where he was now, and this hint that Blake was treating him rather impertinently, as an equal, almost as a confederate, pleased him. The chances were that he was about to taste the success of his recent plans.

He moved over, leant against the wall by the barred window and for a few moments both men looked at each other without speaking; then Hackness broke the silence.

"Well?"

"It's curious, you know," said Blake quietly, "a very curious thing, but my memory seems to have been strangely at fault when last you interviewed me, Inspector Hackness. I can remember quite a lot about that evening which we were discussing, now that I have had time to think it over. On the other hand my memory has always been a curiously fluctuating thing all my life and what I have just remembered may be blotted out at almost any moment."

Hackness did not hesitate.

"You would be brought up on a charge of harbouring a person who had no right to be in the country. You will say that you are extremely sorry, that you had no idea that Miss Estelle Birkett, whom you had met and

made friends with in America, had suffered deportation. You have an excellent record in this country—or shall we say that the police have nothing against you—and I think you will find the official police witnesses will state that your story is almost certainly true. In these circumstances what may happen to Miss Birkett will really not matter very much to you, because I have no doubt that the police will ask leave to withdraw the charge, having made investigations."

"It's a curious thing how my memory fluctuates," said Blake, with a smile. "I see things so very clearly now. You know that evening that you were talking about, the evening on which the surgeon Webb went to his death? I was with Betty Adams that afternoon and she distinctly told me that she was turning down her fiancé, the man Webb, because of various things. His jealous nature, his incapability of understanding that, after all, a girl must have her fling when she is with an attractive man. Those two reasons, I know, came into it, but I can't quite remember what she actually said."

"That will be near enough," said Hackness.

He was beginning to hate the man opposite him, but he controlled himself quite easily. Whatever might be said was all in favour of his plan.

"In any case there was trouble, I know, between them, trouble which quite frankly I thought Miss Adams—Betty, perhaps I should

say—was taking so very seriously that I tried to dissuade her from any stupid action. I thought she was very highly strung that evening. I thought she was behaving in a very strange way, not quite master of herself—or should I say mistress? I took her out to dinner, tried to quieten her, gave her a very good dinner, if I may say so, and you may imagine my surprise when afterwards she announced her intention of leaving me. The ingratitude of these women nowadays—it really is almost incomprehensible! There was I, having spent a small fortune on her entertainment, and she goes and leaves me almost as soon as the port is on the table."

"A close attention to details," said Hackness quietly, "is a little dangerous."

"Oh, no, I've such a good memory," said Blake, " . . . now. I can remember every little incident of that evening. I was surprised, astonished—yes, I must admit it—a little hurt that I should be left in such an extraordinarily abrupt manner, and so, wondering what the girl was up to, jealous perhaps in my turn, thinking that she might be going to some other lover, I followed her.

"I will ask the gentlemen of the jury to bear with me a little here on this point, because I feel that I must explain why I did not go straight to the police with my story immediately after the events which I had witnessed. But I must ask you, gentlemen of the jury, to remember that I was in love with this girl.

You may say, now, that I had a lucky escape—well, perhaps I did, but at that time I was horrified. Just a faint measure of disgust may have come in, but I felt, although I knew I was risking my liberty, that I had to be faithful to this girl no matter how unfaithful she had been to me; that I had to look after her interests as far as I could, at any rate until the time had come when I could see things clearly. That time has come now and that is why I am here before you at this moment. That time——"

"Steady on," said Hackness, laconically, "I'm not a shorthand writer and these beautiful words will be lost to posterity if you waste them on me now."

"In any case," continued Blake, with a smirk, "I saw her go along the street——"

"Oh, hell," said Hackness, "can't you do something better than that?"

"Along the street," continued Blake, "until she came to another street. Down this second street she went until she came to a cross-roads. Here there was a choice of two other streets. Why, by the way, that should be so I cannot think—this was merely a cross-roads, but on the other hand each of the intervening streets was named differently so that undoubtedly, she had a choice of two streets."

"That will do," said Hackness, firmly. "By the way, want a cigarette? It's against the law. Be careful if we should hear anybody coming."

"Thank you so much."

Blake rose to his feet, bowed and sat down again. Evidently he felt himself complete master of the situation; evidently he thought that he had the Inspector entirely under his control. But Hackness was watching him closely; Hackness knew exactly how far to let him go; Hackness knew that before he had done with him that evening Blake would probably hang himself with the rope with which he had supplied him. It never occurred to Hackness for one instant that he could be placed in a position where Blake could black-mail him. There was no one attending these interviews; there was no possible witness against him, and the word of a police officer will always be taken against that of a criminal.

"She took the left hand turn and, instead of walking quickly as she had done before, began to walk slowly, looking about her rather as if she were seeking someone. At least, that was what I thought—and I was right. Very shortly afterwards a man came up to her, a man whom I recognized. It was her brother, Robert Adams. I was some distance away trying, as you can understand, not to be observed, when he came up to her, but their conversation was animated and I think that they were having an argument of some sort: however, I can't be sure, because I remained in my position of vantage where I could see without being seen. They went off together, this time moving with definite purpose, and I followed them. They took me

straight by the shortest way to a house in Wimpole Street. They rang the bell and very soon were admitted.

"I recognized this house as the home of Jarvis Webb. I waited outside—what else could I do? In about twenty minutes the door was opened suddenly and a man staggered out, obviously labouring under severe mental agitation. He passed quite close to me. It was Robert Adams. His face was as white as death and he was murmuring to himself—'My God, what has she done? What has she done?' He continued up the street, walking as if he were drunk, but I knew it was not drunkenness that was affecting him. The full force of what had happened came to me. I realized it instinctively. My attention was disturbed from Robert Adams by the fact that the door opened again; that Betty came out, her face as white as chalk, and without looking to either side of her she scuttled off into the darkness, in the opposite direction to that taken by her brother.

"I was undecided. I did not know what to do. I turned and looked for Robert Adams, but he had disappeared round the corner of the street; then I made off as fast as I could towards Betty, intending at that moment to offer my services in order to help her to escape, but I could not find her. She had disappeared off the face of the earth. I walked for hours in the London streets, wondering what had happened, and the following morning I read of the death of Jarvis Webb. I kept quiet. I

didn't know what I could do. It's only now I realize the folly of what I have done; that I realize I should have spoken at once; that in spite of my friendship for the girl I should not have shielded her, that I come forward voluntarily with my story."

"Thank you," said Hackness. "Do you think you will remember that in the morning?"

"In the morning?" said Blake, and he laughed. "In the morning? Why, I shall remember it just so long, Mr. Hackness, as I am not charged with any misdemeanour."

"Good night," said Hackness abruptly, and walked out of the cell.

Blake lay back luxuriously on the hard bed supplied to prisoners. Somehow it did not seem so hard to him at that moment; somehow he felt that the world was good.

But as Hackness walked up the stairs and into the police station again, the station sergeant came to him with a note. It was a message from the Superintendent of Scotland Yard demanding his immediate presence. A certain elation filled his breast. Might not this have something to do with that promised promotion? His breath came fast . . . and then a fleeting moment of fear clutched at his heart. Had anything gone wrong? Was it at all possible that his interview with Blake had been overheard?

But the next instant common sense flew to his aid. He realized how utterly improbable, indeed, how impossible this was; no words

spoken within the cell could be heard outside. His fears were merely the creations of an overwrought mind and he smiled contemptuously at his own folly, hastening with eager steps in the direction of the Yard.

A few minutes later he knocked at the door of the Superintendent's room and was admitted at once. The Superintendent looked up at him.

"Inspector Hackness," he said, "in view of certain circumstances, one of which is the excellent way in which you have dealt with the case of this Estelle Birkett, and the fact that her arrest is entirely due to you, we are . . . we are . . . er . . . giving you a great chance. A woman has been found murdered at 401, Gentian Place. Will you kindly take charge of the case at once?"

"Very good, sir."

Without another word Hackness turned on his heel. But he was singing within himself, singing with joy. All thought of Betty had, for the moment, been driven away: that could wait. She was now in his power.

But here was the great chance that he had always been longing for, the chance of a startling murder case, headlines in the paper, and perhaps a sensational arrest. He saw himself already in the Superintendent's chair, saw himself already one of the big men of Scotland Yard.

In a moment or two he was in a car on his way to the address which had been given to him.

11

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place, between Alan Fergusson, Resident Surgeon of St. Timothy's Hospital, and Elizabeth, only daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Trevor Adams, of 6, Shadwell Gardens, Woking."

12

Alan Fergusson let *The Times* slip through his fingers on to the desk. It fell near a certain curiously ugly little figure which had played so significant and vital a part in the events leading up to the insertion of that paragraph over which Alan had lingered for several minutes. There was a very tender look in his eyes as he walked thoughtfully to the window, drew aside the blind, and stared unseeingly out into the narrow courtyard fronting the Hospital.

What a good time he would give her. Poor little girl, the last six months had been pretty ghastly for her in every way. As Mrs. Alan Fergusson that part of her life when she called herself Betty Bryant would soon become a vague memory, would soon be wiped entirely from her mind. He would see to that. He would take her abroad for the honeymoon, show her the delights of Paris, the Tyrol, Venice, Spain, perhaps they might even cross

over to America and frivol awhile in New York. But . . . would his passport allow him to? If not it could easily be extended, of course. Better see about it now, though.

He moved over to a little suitcase which lay beneath his desk. It had remained untouched since his return from Switzerland as he had never had cause to open it. He removed the keys from his pocket, inserted one in a lock but, to his surprise, he found it would not work. He tried again, this time inserting the second key in the other lock; again without success. For a few seconds more he struggled with the locks, then realization came . . . both were broken. Even now he failed to comprehend all that this discovery must mean. He started to finger the locks and immediately they slipped back. A second later he was gazing, with a sickening fear clutching his heart, at a miscellaneous mass of books and pamphlets, all jumbled up together in sinister confusion.

His fingers trembling and clumsy in their eagerness, he searched panic-stricken, flinging the books and papers carelessly on to the floor, his mind deadened to all else but the fact that his brown leather wallet, which held that most important document signed by Hackness, was no longer there. It was incredible. Even now Alan's mind refused to credit what was obvious to his eyes, even now he would not believe the case had been rifled. How could it have been? It had lain in his cabin in the boat, in his carriage

in the train. But . . . of course, it must have been left unattended several times. Alan cursed himself: what insane folly!

For a while he remained motionless, remained kneeling beside the case, staring before him, his face white and set, a horrified look in his eyes. Then a sudden thought brought an angry flush to his cheeks. Could Hackness have done this? Was it possible the Inspector had had him watched, perhaps had been watching them both himself? Was it possible he had seized his opportunity when the case was left unattended and had stolen the wallet?

Another examination made Alan reject this idea instantly. The contents had been too carefully rifled for that. A cheque book; several little presents he had brought back for friends; his passport; two big folios containing many more papers, had been stolen also, while in the brown wallet there were a number of treasury notes, ten or fifteen, which he felt sure Hackness would have left behind. It was just a case of common pillage, and for this Alan felt a slight relief. Anyway Hackness had not got it yet. But how on earth was he to regain possession, and without it how would his marriage with Betty be possible?

Ten minutes passed and the silence within the room was absolute. Alan knelt crouching beside the case, his head buried in his arms, his mind a chaos of anguished thought. He was just beginning to see the full hopelessness of this catastrophe, the utter impossibility of

his ever regaining that document, the document which stood for safety, peace of mind, immunity from the power of Hackness. For how could he offer a reward for its recovery? How could he inform the police that he was anxious to regain possession of a paper signed by Detective-Inspector Hackness, a paper which promised silence in consideration of certain things? That would be the final folly, the last tribute to his own crass negligence and idiocy. Everything would be divulged, the document become a menace, damning evidence of their private conspiracy.

Suddenly another thought flashed through his harassed mind: how could he ever sleep peacefully again knowing that other eyes, even though lawless ones, must now be scanning that incriminating paper, gauging with cunning skill the limitless possibilities of blackmail it afforded? What could he do? What could he do? He stared about him wildly as though seeking help and his eyes fell on the telephone upon his desk. Leaping to his feet he darted towards it. Here at any rate was something he could do. Billy Blyth's sane, cheery mind might see some loophole of escape, some means whereby they might be saved even now. In any case it would be a great relief to unburden himself to his friend.

With trembling fingers he lifted the receiver to his ear and dialled the number of Billy's flat. Suppose he should be out? Alan's lips tightened involuntarily at the thought, but a

second later a cheerful "Hullo!" in Blyth's unmistakable tones set this fear at rest.

13

In response to a call from within, which had followed his knock on the door, Inspector Hackness entered the room of the Superintendent.

The elder man looked up from the desk.

"Well?"

"The murdered woman, sir," reported Hackness, "was shot through the back of the head with a revolver of the type supplied to officers during the war. The weapon I have not found: no doubt it was removed by the murderer. The motive was unquestionably robbery: I should say that the unfortunate woman heard a disturbance and went from her bedroom to investigate: she had obviously retired early, for she was in her nightdress. Perhaps there was no light in the sitting-room where she was found on the floor, for she must have walked in right past the murderer where he was standing. The doctor says that death was instantaneous. The victim was a Miss Adela Roberts, an elderly spinster, who had recently come up to London, having inherited a fairly large sum of money. She had taken the flat at 401, Gentian Place only recently, and had just moved in after having it redecorated.

She had been buying herself some jewellery. This must have come to the knowledge of the man who murdered her, for very little was disturbed. Evidently he knew exactly where to find the jewels and he has left hardly any trace."

"Any ideas?" asked the Superintendent, noting that Hackness had paused.

"Yes, sir. A very strong idea. I found fingerprints on the hidden safe which had been opened by the murderer, fingerprints which were not those of the murdered woman: these I have traced to a man who has previously served two sentences for burglary. On the last occasion he got an extra go of prison because he was armed. I have traced this man to come from the same town as Adela Roberts. At one time he lodged in her house before she came into her property. It's a clear case, sir."

"Oh," said the Superintendent, "excellent, Hackness. Where is the man?"

"From enquiries which I instituted last night, sir, I have discovered that the man is living with a woman—who has also got a bad record and may have helped him to commit the robbery, which resulted in the murder—in lodgings in East Ham."

"Oh," said the Superintendent again. "Well, Hackness, you will go and fetch him, no doubt?"

"Yes, sir, but this evening if you don't mind. I want to take them both together if I can, and

I don't want too much fuss about it. He's a cool card, this fellow, and once having killed he may try to kill again."

Hackness smiled.

"Quite so, quite so," said the Superintendent. "All right, Hackness. Don't let the man slip out of your fingers though."

"No fear of that, sir," Hackness laughed. "He's got no idea we are on his track."

"Good," said the Superintendent. "Excellent."

14

There are streets in East Ham which are very mean, streets which give the uncomfortable impression to the stranger who may be wandering about that the sooner he is out of them the better it will be. There is a certain furtiveness about these streets, a sense of mystery, of stealth, so that all their happenings seem to be carried on in a whisper, to be clandestine and secret. The general atmosphere is rather sinister, almost vicious, no doubt a grievous calumny on the good repute of those who live within those gloomy homes. There was one house, however, whose aspect was not unmerited, one house on which the eyes of the law had been fixed for some time, but especially on this particular day.

A burly ruffian had been loitering about,

never actually out of sight of the door, and anyone who had passed within or left the house had been carefully scrutinised without his or her knowledge. The raid itself was carried out with the most remarkable rapidity. One or two unobtrusive figures could have been noticed—had anyone been watching—gathering towards the house. Suddenly the sound of a car came from the far end of the street and the lights of a big saloon rapidly approached the door, which had been under observation throughout the day. It drew up with a grinding of brakes, and almost simultaneously four men jumped to the pavement. The door was opened with little ceremony and they disappeared within.

There was a short interval of suspense for those waiting outside; then, so that it rent the stillness of the night like the sudden shock of thunder immediately overhead, sharp and incisive above the subdued noise of the traffic from streets not far away, there came the sinister crack of a revolver. Dead silence followed this ominous sound.

Six minutes later seven figures returned to the waiting car. The first was a woman, a woman who was screaming hysterical blasphemies into the rather shocked quiet of the night. In close attendance on her was a man in plain clothes, but nevertheless with policeman stamped all over him. The third, also a man, closely attended by the fourth—surliness in defeat obvious in his every attitude.

The fifth and sixth between them carried the seventh member of the party.

On the way back as the car was being driven rapidly through the streets, Inspector French, sitting beside Inspector Barnett, who was driving, broke the silence.

"Bad luck on old Hacker, you know."

"Was it instantaneous?"

"Oh, yes, bullet went right through his brain as he opened the door."

"Damn bad luck," said the other. "Hacker had always been wanting a good murder case, and, by Jove, he'd got it."

15

"Hullo, Billy. Quick, I want to talk to you."

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

"Sorry, Billy, but I've just had an awful shock."

"What's happened? Do you want me to come round?"

"I don't know. Yes . . . no . . . I mean . . . look, I'll tell you what's happened. On the way over somebody has rifled my case . . . taken papers."

"Well, go to the police," said Blyth casually.

"Wait . . . you don't understand . . . among those papers *the* paper has gone."

There was a moment's silence at the other end of the wire. Evidently the full significance of the words had only now penetrated into Blyth's brain.

"Funny," suddenly came Blyth's voice. "Funny, you know."

"Funny!" Alan almost screamed. "I see nothing funny in it."

"You will though . . . but I meant funny all the same, funny that you should ring me up when I was about to ring you, for instance, funny that you should tell me so hysterically of the loss of a perfectly valueless piece of paper."

"Valueless?"

The word was almost unintelligible to Blyth, so loudly was it shouted.

"Quite valueless, old chap. I've just been doing a spot of thinking. Don't say unusual, I'll say it for you—unusual! Now, listen. You don't want that paper at all. Just as well that it has gone, it's useless in any stranger's eyes because nobody would believe it was a real document of any value. Anyway we can all deny having had anything to do with it. But don't you see that Hackness is absolutely powerless against us; don't you see . . . remember what you told me about the hospital law that night when we were discussing whether or not we ought to operate on the man whom we didn't yet know

was Robert Adams? Betty came to see you that night . . . let's say she did. All she's got to explain is that she doesn't believe in doctors, that she didn't like the whole thing and that she refused her permission to operate. The hospital law says you can't operate without the full consent of the patient, or, when he is unconscious, the written consent of the nearest relative. See, Alan, you've got nothing to fear, old man, nothing to fear."

For a long moment the wires were silent, and then as if from a great distance Blyth heard his friend's voice, fervent with overwhelming relief:

"Nothing to fear."

THE END